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TIGER TOM, THE TEXAN TERROR.

BY OLL COOMES,

AUTHOR OF "LITTLE HURRICANE," "OLD SOLITARY," "LITTLE TEXAS," "EAGLE KIT," "LONG BEARD," ETC., ETC.



STILL GRASPING THE SERPENT, HE SWUNG IT ALOFT LIKE A WHIP AND STRUCK THE BEAR A FEARFUL BLOW.

Tiger Tom, THE TEXAN TERROR.

A Romance of the Southern Pampas.

BY OLL COOMES,

AUTHOR OF "BOY HERCULES," "PROSPECT PETE," "OLD SOLITARY," "LITTLE TEXAS," "TIGER TOM," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

AN INTERCEPTED MESSAGE.

A TRAIN of canvas-covered wagons was slowly moving across the plains of Western Texas under a September sky. It consisted of eight heavy and two light, spring wagons—each of the former drawn by six mules, the latter by two; and in addition to the animals in harness, there were, at least, a dozen led horses.

It was not an emigrant train, but that of a prairie trader, Mr. Daniel Walden, who was bound with loads of merchandise for a remote settlement. Twenty persons, all told, composed the party. But three of these were women—two young girls and a negress. Of the former, Jacquetta Walden was the only child of Daniel Walden—a fair and lovely girl of eighteen, with dark eyes, rosy cheeks and a spirit full of sunshine and joy. In the past five years Mr. Walden had made many overland trips into the West—twice to Santa Fe—with merchandise, and each time he was accompanied by his daughter who shared with him the dangers and hardships of the journey, and partook of its pleasures and excitements with the spirit of a brave, romantic girl. Dangers from the prairie freebooters and marauding bands of Comanches beset the path of the prairie merchant and the emigrant, but so far, Walden had been exceedingly fortunate in escaping these foes. His men were all true and tried, and since Jacquetta had become an idol with them, each and every man registered a vow that he would die in defense of that idol. Her presence was always inspiring to the dusty, wearied drivers for whom she always had a kind word and a smile; and when in camp of evenings the sweet strains of her guitar mingled with the melody of her own sweet voice seemed to fill the place with enchantment and awaken forgotten memories in the breasts of the freighters, or weave stronger the silken cords of love and admiration around their hearts. If any one was sick or became dispirited, ministrations by her hands, words of encouragement from her lips, or a peal of rippling laughter were as healing balm.

Miss Jacquetta was an excellent equestrienne. Old Abe Bronson, the guide, declared he had "never see'd her beats; she could ride like a Comanche—was a perfect centaur." Half the journey across the plain she made in the saddle upon the back of a spirited Texan horse that had once run wild on the llanos. She was also a fine shot, with either rifle or revolver, and many antelope and deer fell under her unerring aim.

But notwithstanding Jacquetta's gayety of spirit and outward appearance of free-heartedness, there were times when she seemed sad—when the shadow of some sorrow or secret seemed to cloud her heart. No one but her father ever noticed this, and it pained him when he reflected on the fact that love might be at the bottom of it all. Two years previous he had in his employ as scout and guide, a dashing youth of nineteen named Tom Brayton. He had been with him three years. He was a brave, daring boy—true to his trust, and familiar with his work, but Mr. Walden had noticed that his guide was in love with his daughter, and through fear that love would be reciprocated and his idolized child taken from him, he discharged Tom and employed another guide. This seemed like a great blow to Jacquetta, and it was with sadness that she parted with her boy-lover. Before a year had passed, the name of Tiger Tom had been heard of throughout western Texas, and it seemed to carry fear and terror with it; and when Mr. Walden had learned that Tiger Tom was none other than his boy guide, a vague fear took possession of his breast. He believed that the boy, disappointed in love, had turned outlaw, and with a band of reckless men was leading the life of a prairie freebooter; and he trembled with fear for the life of his child as he pursued his way across the plains.

Jacquetta's companion was a Miss Irene Miller, the daughter of Captain Cyrus Miller, of the regular army, and then stationed at Fort Concho. Daniel Walden and Captain Miller had

been friends from boyhood, and it was the captain who had first induced Walden to embark in the risky yet profitable business of a prairie merchant. His influence in military circles had enabled the captain to throw a great protection around his friend, and his acquaintance with the different post-traders had furnished Walden with good markets for his goods. The last time the prairie-merchant called at the fort, Irene Miller, who had become tired of the monotony of the military post, prevailed on her father to allow her to accompany Jacquetta East, and she was now on her return to her parents at the fort.

The negress heretofore mentioned was Jacquetta's servant.

It is the middle of the afternoon. The train has been weeks upon its journey. It is following an old military road. It is a different route from that over which Tom Brayton had usually led the train, though perfectly familiar to Abe Bronson. This new road had been taken through fear that Tiger Tom and his band might be lurking along the old trail.

Old Abe Bronson, mounted upon a mustang, is riding in advance of the train. He is a man of fifty, and a perfect type of the rough, bearded plainsman. He carries his rifle across the pommel of his saddle. His eyes are ever on the alert for danger. He watches the heavens above him and the earth beneath him. A bird in the air, an animal on the plain, or a track in the soil, to him have a certain significance. A swift wing or a flying hoof denote danger, but none of these unfavorable signs meet his eyes as he rides along whistling softly to himself.

Perched on top of the foremost wagon with evident ease, is a large bird. It is an eagle—not a large one but a fierce, rapacious-looking bird. It is the pet of Abe Bronson. For years it has been the constant companion of the guide. It is a sagacious bird, and from its associations has learned who the enemies of its master are, and being ever on the alert and keen of vision, it often gives warning of approaching dangers that the human eye cannot detect. As the train moves on this bird spreads his wings, sails down over the head of its master, then shoots upward into the air in spiral circles, rises up and up until almost lost in the blue depths of the sky. There is nothing unusual, however, in this movement of the bird, for he spends much of the time in aerial rambles.

The train is moving across the plain in a southwesterly course. The Red Fork of the Colorado is before them—how far, the guide does not know exactly; but he is anxious to reach it for the horses and mules are well jaded from a long, hard drive across the plain without water or rest.

Suddenly, as he reaches the summit of a long low swell in the prairie a clump of timber meets his eyes and turning in his saddle he shouts back:

"Whooray! the Colorado yonder!—wood, water, and rest!"

The foremost driver utters an exclamation of joy and sends the good news back along the train.

One of the light wagons instantly stops and Jacquetta and Irene spring out. They mean to be the first to reach the river. A man brings two horses, with side-saddles upon them, around to where the maidens are waiting and assists the excited girls to mount.

"Looker here, Missus Jac," cried out the fat negress, "whar you gwine to, chile?"

"To take a ride, aunty," was the maiden's response; "Irene and I will ride on to the river and wait for you. It isn't more than a mile or two away."

"Wal, do be keerless, honey: I'se so 'fraid your harem-skeerimum spirit'll git you into trouble. S'pose Tiger Tom and a whole gob ob Comanches sweep down on you and eat you up, what ole aunty do?" and the old negress wrung her hands and shuddered at the horror of the thought.

With a merry laugh Jacquetta, followed by Irene, galloped away in advance of the train—sweeping by Old Abe like the wind—acknowledging his disapproving shake of the head with a wave of her little hand.

Distance on the plains is very deceiving, and what appeared to the maidens to be only a mile or two was, in reality, five. Old Abe was satisfied that they had underestimated the distance to the river, but before he could warn them of the fact they were out of hearing. The old guide was provoked. He did not approve of the girls leaving the train as they so often did, and he turned his horse and rode back to remonstrate with Mr. Walden against indulging Jacquetta in those long rides away from the

train. But before he had found the trader, a scream was heard overhead and lifting his eyes the old man beheld his pet eagle descend from the heavens and settle on one of the wagons. In his claws he held a snow-white bird. His beak was stained with blood.

"Ho, Comet!" exclaimed Bronson, "you wicked old cannibal, what have you there? You old sky-scavenger, let me see that bird, it looks like a carrier-pigeon."

Bronson dismounted from his horse, and climbing into the driver's seat succeeded in getting the bird from the eagle. It proved to be a pigeon, sure enough, still struggling in the throes of death. The talons of the eagle had pierced its sides, and while looking the bird over, a cry suddenly burst from the old guide's lips.

"By the roarin' Jehosephat!" he exclaimed, "this is a carrier-pigeon, folks, and here's a message on it!"

He removed from the body of the bird a tiny bit of neatly-folded paper secured with a fine silken cord, and handed it down to Mr. Walden.

The trader carefully unfolded it, and found written thereon, in a fine delicate hand, the following:

"BRAZOS, Sept 9, 18—

"Look out for Walden on Red Fork of Colorado. He left here yesterday, and will cross at upper ford on old military road about the evening of the 11th or morning of the 12th. There are seventeen men, all well armed—three women. Srr."

"Great Lord!" burst from Bronson's lips, "then we're in danger, but from whom—Indians or outlaws?"

"I cannot tell," replied Walden, "the message is addressed to no one; but I have my suspicions."

"Tiger Tom?" asked Abe.

"Yes," he replied; "and, great heavens! the girls are gone out of reach and hearing—riding no doubt into the jaws of death! Abe, I must go after them. Warn all the boys, and tell them to be prepared for the worst."

In the mean time the girls had sped along the dim road and approached the river. As they entered the timber skirting the stream they reined their horses into a walk, but the moment the water burst upon their view, the half-famished animals dashed forward and lunged into the stream, despite the efforts of their riders to restrain them. The water, however, was quite shallow, and the fears of the maidens subsided when they found there was no danger.

When the horses had slaked their burning thirst, Irene turned and rode back to the shore, but Jacquetta, being seized with the spirit of adventure, rode on into the river and onto a sand-bar just visible an inch or two under the water.

"Why, Jacquetta," exclaimed Irene, when she saw what her friend had done, "what are you about?"

"I want to inspect this ford, where the teams are to cross," the other replied, with a laugh, as she reined in her pony on the bar.

A momentary silence ensued. Above and below the adventuresome Jacquetta the river glowed in the sunlight. A soft breeze drifting across the plain stirred the leaves of oak and cedar into a gentle murmur—kissed the rosy cheeks of the fair girl and toyed with the ringlets that escaped from under her rakish little hat.

In the midst of these tranquil moments the report of a rifle came over the plain from the direction of the train, and was followed by a wild, fiendish yell, as if of defiance.

The maidens were startled. A cry of fear burst from their lips.

"Jacquetta, what does that mean?" Irene called out to her friend.

"Oh, heavens! Irene, I fear the worst has happened. That was an Indian's yell; but wait till I come over, and we will ride back to the edge of the chaparral, where we can see across the prairie. Come, get up, Sparrow, what ails you?"

Jacquetta's last words were addressed to her horse, whose feet seemed held down as if by heavy weights, and whose attempt to move resulted in a violent, convulsive strain of the body that almost threw his rider from the saddle.

"Oh, Jacquetta!" cried Irene in a tone of wild excitement, "your horse is sinking in the sand!"

A little cry burst from Jacquetta's lips, and her face became pale with fear, for she realized with startling force that she was going down in the treacherous quicksands of a Texan river.

She glanced around her with a wild look, and called to Heaven for help.

A bird swept over the river from the west—turned and with an impish scream sped away toward the north.

The sound of a conflict back on the plain became more distinct, leaving no doubt as to the train having been attacked.

"Oh, Irene, what shall I do?" cried the terrified Jacquetta.

The clatter of hoofs seemed to answer her; then out from the woods on the east side of the river dashed a horseman.

A cry of terror burst from Irene's lips as he swept past her, for he was a Comanche warrior, hideous in the paint and paraphernalia of the war-path, naked to the waist, and with the glare of a demon on his face. He rode bare-backed, and carried in his hand a long, shining lance, at which dangled a human scalp.

Into the river rode the savage, his burning eyes fixed upon the terrified Jacquetta as though it were his intention of saving her from the threatened death in the quicksands by impaling her upon his lance.

But just as he entered the river on the north side, another horseman galloped out of the woods on the south side, and plunged into the stream. He, however, was a white man, dressed in an elegant suit of a ranger with a shining shield upon his breast in the center of which was a medallion head of a tiger. At his side hung a sword—in his belt was a pair of revolvers. His horse was a spirited bay steed, handsomely caparisoned with silver-mounted trappings.

Irene saw that this gallant, dashing stranger was a young man of perhaps one-and-twenty. Dark, wavy hair hung down his shoulders from under a silver-banded *sombrero*. A dark-brown mustache shaded his mouth and gave an expression of manly beauty and strength to his face.

The Comanche saw the ranger the instant he appeared in sight, and with a fierce war-whoop that chilled the blood in Irene's veins, he turned his attention from Jacquetta and advanced to meet the man.

In mid-river they met the savage with drawn lance, and the ranger with drawn sword. Clear rings the barbed point of the red-man's steel on the breast-plate of the white man. A yell of chagrin escapes the warrior's lips as his weapon glances harmlessly off from the breast he sought to pierce, while the sword of the ranger flashes in the air and the lance shaft is struck from the Comanche's hand. Then, as a yell of triumph bursts from the white man's lips—as the savage endeavors to escape past him, he makes a side stroke with his keen blade; the head of the savage drops forward upon his breast, while from the almost headless trunk jets of blood spurt upward and fall in crimson spray in the river.

So quick did the young ranger perform his bloody work—so skillfully did he meet the foe and handle his sword, that he scarcely checked the forward movement of his horse; and ere the body of the savage had fallen from his mustang, the young knight dashed forward across the sand-bar and, as he passed Jacquetta, he threw out his arm and, dragging her from her saddle, carried her safely to shore; thus, in a minute's time, almost, performing a double act that would have immortalized the most ignoble knight of the Crusades.

As the young ranger placed Jacquetta on the ground, he dismounted and, taking her hand, said:

"Jacquetta, do you not know me?"

Jacquetta started, and a cry—half fear and half joy—escaped her lips, and throwing her arms about the ranger's neck, pillowed her head upon his breast and burst into tears.

"Oh, Tom! Tom!" she sobbed.

"My darling," he whispered, "you had a narrow escape, but let us be thankful to Him who directed me here at the right moment."

"Oh, Tom!" cried the maiden, starting up as though she had suddenly become aware of the fact that there was a witness to their meeting; "you have changed so in two years—your face was smooth when I saw you last; but Tom, this is my friend, Miss Miller."

The young man lifted his hat politely and spoke to the surprised and confused maiden.

"I hope you will pardon my thoughtlessness, Irene," Jacquetta said, apologizing for her seeming neglect.

"Oh, certainly, Jacquetta; my only wonder is that you could be yourself again so soon after passing through what you have."

The moment Jacquetta's horse was free of its rider and the restraint of the reins, it made a

desperate struggle for life, and finally succeeded in escaping from the power of the quicksands.

Jacquetta clapped her hands and cried with joy as the animal came ashore and up to her, manifesting almost human joy.

"The sands of these rivers are treacherous," said the young ranger, "and in crossing them one must never stop for a moment where there is no current."

"I ought to have known better, Tom," replied Jacquetta, "for I have often heard father cautioning his men about the treachery of the quicksands. But, Tom, what does that mean?"

Jacquetta pointed to the tiger head on his breast-plate.

The young ranger smiled.

"Oh, nothing in particular," he replied; "it's a kind of badge or insignia. You know I am a ranger now, Jacquetta."

"Nothing more, Tom?" the maiden asked.

"Jacquetta, what means that firing, and those yells?" he replied, evasively, as the crash of firearms and the yell of savages came over the plain.

"I am afraid our train has been attacked," replied Jacquetta, her young heart ceasing to beat.

"Girls," said Tom, "be so kind as to remain here until I ride to the edge of the wood and see how goes the battle. That Indian was undoubtedly sent up here to capture you, and if you keep under cover his friends may not know how the matter ended."

As he spoke he vaulted into his saddle and dashed away through the grove.

"Oh, Jacquetta," exclaimed Irene when the maidens were alone, "what a narrow escape you had from death."

"Yes, Irene," the other answered, "but perhaps it would have been better for me had I gone down in the quicksands."

"Why, my dear girl, how you talk! Was that not Tom Brayton, your father's old guide, and the gallant handsome lover of whom you have told me so often?"

"Yes, Irene, that is Tom Brayton; but do you think it possible that he is 'Tiger Tom'?"

"No, I do not, Jacquetta; I can't believe that one so young and daring—so noble-looking and brave could be an outlaw. It is true, he evaded your question, but I do not think he understood you."

"I hope you are right, Irene; father has been so prejudiced against him—feels so positive that Tom Brayton is 'Tiger Tom,' that I had begun to fear the worst."

"Oh heavens, Jacquetta! hear the terrible sounds back on the prairie!"

Jacquetta mounted a fallen log and leading up her pony leaped into the saddle. At this juncture the young ranger galloped back through the woods and drawing rein alongside of them said excitedly:

"Jacquetta—ladies, a horde of Comanches have attacked your friends! you must remain concealed in this clump of timber until the danger is over, and I will see what I can do for your friends. Will you promise me that you will, Jacquetta? When all danger is past then I will return to you."

"Oh, Tom! what can you do alone toward relieving the train?"

"I am not alone, my dear Jacquetta," replied the young ranger, and removing a bugle that hung at the bow of his saddle, he placed it to his lips and blew a shrill blast upon it.

As the followers of Ramiro answered the sound of his horn when the king sat a Moorish captive, so responded the followers of Tiger Tom to his bugle-call, and out of the woods on the southern shore dashed two-score horsemen.

A cry of fear and horror involuntarily burst from the maidens' lips, for the faces of these rangers were masked so as to resemble the faces of tigers. Their arms and shoulders were dressed in close-fitting buckskin, while upon their breasts they wore what appeared to be breast-plates covered with jaguar skins.

Frightful indeed looked this band of mounted human tigers as they plunged through the river; but as they emerged from the stream, each one in mute silence politely touched his hat to the half-terrified maidens, as he galloped on toward the plain.

In a few moments alld had disappeared behind the woods, but scarcely were they out of sight ere another band of mounted men appeared on the south side of the river—evidently in pursuit of the Texan Tigers.

CHAPTER II.

A WILD, SAVAGE PERFORMANCE.

We left Mr. Walden starting in pursuit of Jacquetta and Irene, but he had gone but a

short ways when Abe Bronson called him back. The old guide had discovered an Indian lurking behind a bunch of tall cactus, and was well enough satisfied that he was a spy.

In an instant he whirled his horse and rode back.

"Shoot the skulking coyote, Abe," he commanded, when he had learned of the presence of the red-skin.

Old Abe slipped from his saddle, and resting his rifle across the rump of his trained horse, took a careful aim at the cactus, and fired. He did not hit the red-skin, but the shot had the effect of dislodging him from his covert, and as he sprang to his feet with a defiant yell, Old Abe fired another shot from his repeater, and the red-skin fell dead.

But, scarcely had the smoke of the last shot cleared away before a hundred mounted Comanches were seen to sweep out from behind a clump of timber down the river, and head directly toward the train.

"Comanches, boys! Comanches in force!" yelled Old Abe. "Lick up the teams, boys, and make the river, if ye possibly can!"

In an instant all was excitement. The crack of the teamsters' whips stung through the air like the report of pistols as the mules were urged into a gallop.

The Indians were all of four or five miles away, and the river at the nearest point was about two miles distant, but straight toward this point the old plainsman led the way.

Mr. Walden, mounted upon a spirited horse, rode alongside of him.

"Abe, my child and Irene are lost!" he moaned in anguish of heart.

"Let us hope for the best," replied Abe; "if the gals hav'n't been seen by the Indians, and keep hid, they may escape; but, boss, I'm afraid we'll not be able to make the river before they devils overhaul us. We've got to do somethin' to check 'em."

"Perhaps we'd better drop the hindmost wagon, Abe; it's loaded with fancy articles and dry goods that may dazzle their eyes and hold them back until we can escape—make the river."

"Ay, that was in my head, boss," replied the old guide, "but it's a great sacrifice, is it not?"

"Better that than life," answered Walden, and turning he rode back and ordered the hindmost teamster to unhitch his mules and leave his wagon behind.

Loth to give up his "ship," the driver detached his team, and the wagon, with its valuable freight, was left to the mercy of the Bedouins of the southern pampas.

As soon as the Indians saw the train head for the river, they divined their object, and, bearing to the left, resolved to cut them off; but the moment they saw the wagon deserted it seemed that everything else was forgotten in one mad rush for the vehicle and plunder, and the teams were permitted to escape to the river, on the banks of which Old Abe had everything in readiness for a stubborn defense.

By this time the Comanches had reached the deserted wagon, and were howling and fighting around it like coyotes around a carcass. The heavy tilt was stripped from the bows, and every box and bundle tossed out upon the ground. There were white renegades in the band, who were evidently old, experienced hands at plundering merchant wagons.

A search was first made for whisky—an article known to be carried by most prairie traders, but great was the disappointment of the party when the last box had been thrown out and no liquor found. With a look of vengeance the band turned their faces toward the train with direful mutterings.

Suddenly an exclamation of joy burst from the lips of one of the white Comanches. He had, with his hatchet, burst the side off a box, when lo! two dozen bottles of "Plantation Bitters" were revealed to his startled gaze.

A shout of joy followed this discovery, then a wolfish scramble ensued for the prize. In two minutes the case had been emptied of its bottles. Tomahawks answered the purpose of corkscrews. The necks of the bottles were clipped off and then followed a silence—a dead suspense—broken only by the gurgling of the contents of twenty-four bottles down as many throats. The first served were the best served, and after drinking until out of breath, they passed the "medicine" to their impatient, choking friends, who drank and, in turn, passed it on. In this manner the "bitters" went around, although the last to drink obtained but a swallow—just enough to whet their appetite for more; and so tomahawks were brought into requisition and

every box and bundle chopped open and contents dragged out, but not another drop of liquor could they find; and so the frenzied horde turned their attention to plunder that pleased the eye instead of the appetite.

Bolts of dry goods of every description and color, rolls of bright-colored ribbon, cards of cheap lace, broad-brimmed hats—both felt and straw, boots and shoes, gloves and shawls, and beautifully beaded works of every kind calculated to please the savage eye, were found in such a brilliant profusion that they seemed to bewilder the half-intoxicated Indians.

Each red-skin began to rig himself up in such things as suited his fancy. High-topped boots with red stars set in a blue field were the first attraction over which a lively struggle ensued, for all saw there were not boots enough to go around. Some few secured a pair, but most of them got but a single boot, but never complaining, made out the pair with a shoe or beaded moccasin. Next came the distribution of hats, but there were enough of them to go around. To each hat then were attached two or three rolls of ribbon. A few secured shawls which they girded about their waists, and many wound and wrapped their bodies in rolls of different colored ribbon and lace. Those that failed to secure a pair of gloves appropriated ladies' hose as a substitute. A box of cheap jewelry was next distributed and then, when the savages had sufficiently bedecked themselves they turned their attention to their horses. Ribbons were wound about the animals' necks, bodies and legs and fastened to the bridle-bits and reins. Bolts of calico were unrolled and one end tied to a horse's tail, and then mounting, the whole band galloped out into the plain and began to ride in a circle about the wagon—presenting the most exciting, grotesque and demoniac scene ever witnessed on a Texan prairie.

Around and around in a circle a mile in length galloped the frantic demons. Yards of fluttering ribbon and rods of streaming calicoes, of every color trailed out behind in endless confusion—whipping and flapping in the air—making the scene as brilliant and fantastic as it was wild and fiendish.

The life of a friend was of no consequence as compared with the demoniac sport, for now and then a horse's legs became entangled in the confusion of dragging calico and fell, throwing its rider who was trampled to death under flying hoofs unless he was fortunate enough to save himself. And thus matters continued for fully an hour.

Meanwhile our friends, the freighters, had approved the moments. Rifle-pits had been dug just outside the lines of wagons while inside the corille of vehicles, another row of pits were dug as a last refuge when driven from those outside.

Old Abe Bronson felt satisfied that they could not escape without a visit from the foe, and in this he was right, for scarcely had their wild performance ended ere they turned and came sweeping down toward the train yelling like demons.

"Now, men," the old plainsman said, "the time is come for you to show your nerve and mettle. Don't waste a shot; keep cool and take a good aim at a savage breast."

Every man kneeling in the rifle-pits calmly awaited the approach of the foe with his rifle lying on the bank before him, while the old negro, Jacquetta's mistress, sat in a pit inside the row of wagons crooning a prayer for Jacquetta's safety.

There was one savage, mounted upon a large black horse, of great speed, that rode some rods in advance of his friends—swinging a tomahawk above his head and screaming like a mad tiger. Naturally enough the eye of every freighter turned toward this warrior, and naturally enough each man resolved, to end his career; but before they had time to carry out this resolution, an unseen rifle rung out and the savage, throwing up his arms, reeled in his saddle and fell to the earth lifeless.

"Who fired that shot?" cried Mr. Walden, glancing from one to the other of his men.

Nobody answered for nobody knew. The report had seemed to come from over them—from mid-air. It was a long and skillful shot, but who was the mysterious marksman that had fired it?—Where was he?

While the freighters were revolving these questions in their minds—with their eyes upon the advancing savages and their fingers on the triggers of their guns—that unknown rifle again rung out above them and another savage fell from his horse.

"By heavens!" cried Walden, "that shot

came from one of the wagons! who of our men is in there?"

"No one! no one!" cried several voices; "every man is here."

True enough, all of his men were present in the pits, and yet there was some one in one of the wagons whose heavy canvas tilts had been, as all supposed, securely tacked down all around. But who could that unknown be? and how came he there?

There was no time now, however, for a solution of this mystery, for the advancing savages were within a hundred yards of the wagons and leveling their rifles on them the freighters were about to fire when a hoarse, raspy voice in the wagon behind Walden yelled out:

"Fire, boys! Give the screamin' hellonians fits and fury!"

For the third time that unknown rifle pealed out and was followed by the crash of the freighters' guns. A dozen savages tumbled from their horses, but, undaunted, the others pressed on with fiendish yells.

Throwing aside their rifles the freighters drew their big navy revolvers and opened an unceasing fire upon them. Every shot told, too, and so deadly was the fire, and so well were the defenders concealed, that the savages wavered when almost on the edge of the rifle-pits, and turning, fled in great confusion before those deadly weapons. But they were compelled to retreat a long ways before they were out of reach of that one deadly rifle in the wagon, which, at regular intervals, rung out the doom of a red-skin.

When the Comanches had withdrawn, at least half a mile, and all immediate danger had passed, Mr. Walden sprung from the rifle-pit, declaring:

"Now I am going to know who's in that wagon."

As he approached the vehicle he was startled by the sudden appearance of a face in a slit in the canvas-cover. It was a rough, comical face, with a squint eye, a wide mouth hedged around with short, bristling beard; a big, thin Roman nose, and long eye-brows that fell over his little gray eyes like miniature waterfalls. His head was surmounted by an old battered hat. His shirt collar was unfastened and lay open, revealing a hairy neck and breast.

"Thunder and Mars!" exclaimed Walden, "who in the mystery are you, man? and where did you come from?"

"Say, now, captain," replied the old stranger, in a cool, yet conciliatory tone, "now don't spin off yer pins and chaw yer chin, but just consider me a blessing in disguise and receive me with smiles. I'll admit I'm not handsome nor graceful as a gazelle, yet I'm an honest critter, notwithstandin' you've caught me in a rather suspicious position. I'm not a coyote or sneak-thief, but I'm a species of that noble bird called the Cuckoo, for bein' so often found in other folks' nests."

"How the nation did you get in there, and when?" asked Walden.

The old stranger crawled down out of the wagon and with a broad smile upon his face drew himself up before the freighters, with no little confusion manifested in his action. He was a tall, angular man of perhaps fifty years of age—an odd and comical-looking old fellow in whose gray eyes sparkled the very light of mischief and rollicking fun. He held in one hand a fine, repeating rifle, while from the bosom of his shirt peeped the polished butt of a pistol.

"Now, gentlemen," he said, as he shifted the wad of tobacco in his mouth, "I'm goin' to make a clean breast to you of all my sins. My name is William Proctor, M. D.—better known as Old Bill Proctor, the Pill Peddler. Tired and weary the night you camped on Comanche Creek, I managed to crawl into that wagon with a canteen of water and rations for two days and take secret passage for the Colorado. I knew that if I'd applied for passage you'd 'a' hung me for a bloody ole pirate, and so I concluded, as you war not likely to look in under the wagon kiver, I'd best steal a ride. It war mean, folks, I'll admit; but somethin'—I don't know what—tempted me to do it, and here I am."

"But what the 'tarnal nation does a pill-peddler want up here?" asked Old Abe Bronson; "thar's no sick people here—nothin' but Comanches and tarantulas."

"Ay! them's the kind I doctor, my noble duke," Old Bill Proctor replied; "and the pills I dispense are hard ones, and are 'ministered through that," and he patted his rifle affectionately.

The freighters applauded the nomad, whom

they now discovered to be no ordinary prairie vagabond in some respects.

"We understand you now, Bill; we have seen how you administer your pills," Walden said, "and I am glad of our acquisition. You can consider your stolen ride paid for, with a balance in your favor, and upon this I give you my hand."

"Whooray!" shouted the old plainsman in evident delight, "and now I'm myself again. That's right, boys, come up and have the sublime honor o' squeezin' the phelanges and metacarples o' Old Bill Proctor. I'm not so handsome as a Mexican senorita, for you must know the wear and tear o' fifty odd years 'll spile the daintiest rose."

"How long have you been in Texas, ole man?" asked Bronson.

"Off and on ever since old Mrs. Proctor—my mother, God bless her—shut up her dress front and said to me: 'Billy, this milk business must be stopped; shift fer yerself, my kid.' And so I did. In the past thirty years I've done everything, from teachin' a school to—"

"What's that? you teach school?" interrupted Old Abe.

"Yes, my gay ole duke, I teach'd a family o' six young beasts to perform as never did bears perform, but my scholars brought me to grief, dod seize their stuffed skins! You see, arter they'd graduated, I went up to ole Missouri on a showin' tour. One night I war at Coon Holler, and forty niggers, at ten cents a head, come to the show in their best, and everything was a-going superbly until a young buck nigger, jist from a hen-roost, with feathers on his teeth and blood on his lips, came waltzin' in. The bears caught the scent of fresh blood, and afore I could yell 'Davy Crockett,' the 'tarnal brutes jumped onto that nigger and chawed him up into rags. Seven pickaninnies war also missin'. Wal, the authorities come in and killed every one of my scholars, and raised Ned in generil. I sued old Pukedom for damages and got five hundred dollars judgment, but this war more'n bu'sted by a cross claim, and judgment for them dead niggers, so I kicked the dust of that country from my feet and pulled for Texas atwixt two days. I come up here and run for the Legislature, and war elected, too, by a whoopin' big majority."

"Indeed! then you are a Texan statesman?"

"Yes, I war elected, but I didn't serve; for ye see, the devil conspired against me again. Thar war only four hundred and three voters in my destrict, and every dod-gasted mother's son o' them war pledged, at a pint apiece, to my opponent, Elias Skinner. But I wer'n't to be beat that way, and so I went over to Mexico and went to work—coat off, sleeves up, collar open. The Mexicans hate Texans wuss nor the devil hates holy water, and so I promised 'em if they'd come over to Texas and vote for me on a certain day, I'd introduce a bill for an appropriation of a few million dollars to seep out Texas and make an inland sea of it. The idea pleased them—they figgered on it—said the Yankees could do anything, and when the election day come, they appeared, as per promise, and voted solid for Bill Proctor; and the footin's showed me elected fair and squarely by four hundred majority over Skinner. But Skinner squealed, and when I went down to the capital with my bill in my pocket for the inland sea money, cuss my liver-pins if he weren't there to contest my election, and after two days' consultin' over the matter by the big muck a-wucks, blame me if Skinner wasn't seated—that is, he took his seat after he got over the poundin' I give him. So I war adrift on the cold world again—onseated by a tech-nick-ally, as them big mucks called it. Jist think of it, gentlemen of the mule teams! if I'd been seated accordin' to the constitution, Texas would to-day be a briny deep, and you'd be sailin', perhaps, with your merchandise in vessels for the great port of Llano Estacado; and instead o' Comanches an' Texas Tigers roamin' around here as they are to kill and plunder, the festive man-eater, the sportive godolphin, the great whale and the musical mermaid would be roamin' the rolling waters o' the Texan sea. Geese, they say, saved Rome; a tech-nick-ally kept Texas from under water. Eight hundred Mexicans are settin' day in and day out over on t'other side o' the Rio Grande waitin' for the work to begin. I hearn once they wanted to see me, but I'm not goin' over there for fifty years; I hate Mexico. But, gentlemen, you'll learn more about me as we sojourn together if I'm permitted to talk."

"I observe you are a good shot, Bill," said Walden, anxious to change the subject.

"Fair to medium—not so good as once, but

can make Rome howl with any pill-peddler in Texas yet; but, folks, I see those bloody fiends are preparing for another charge upon us, and we want to receipt the purgatorians warmly—hotly."

True enough, the savages were already formed and galloping toward the train, lying flat upon their animals' backs. In a moment the freighters were back in their rifle-pits ready for the onset.

"They mean business this time, men," said Abe Bronson, "and we can count on a desperate conflict."

"Texan Tigers! Texan Tigers! whoo-rah!" suddenly burst in startling notes from the lips of Old Bill Proctor.

Looking away toward the west, the freighters saw another band of horsemen sweeping across the plain as though it were a race between them and the savages as to which should reach the wagon train first.

"My God! we are doomed if those are the Texan Tigers!" cried Mr. Walden. "Oh, those poor girls! they are lost, lost!"

"Don't worry, capt'n," said Old Bill; "them Tigers and the Comanches don't filliate more'n water and grease. Thar! see thar now! by the smoke of the torments! the Tigers are goin' for the Comanches now! Whoo-rah, for sweet glory! Boys, you'll hear Rome howl now. The Ingins are three to one, but the tigers are holy singers—a hull masked battery and a hoss-pistol throwed in. Whoo-ray, Tigers!"

True enough, the party of Texan Tigers, whom rumor had painted as the enemies of all mankind and who killed and plundered for the love of crime, had veered off toward the savages, who, checking their advance on the freighters, turned to meet their new foe.

There was a moment of breathless silence and suspense in the rifle-pits as the freighters watched the Tigers skimming along the prairie. When about fifty paces from the Indians, a cloud of smoke burst from over the head of each Tiger's horse, and then the report of two-score rifles came rolling down the valley mingled with yells of defiance and cries of agony, and while the smoke of their rifles still hung on the air behind, the white horsemen drew their swords and charged on until the two lines met in a deadly hand-to-hand conflict. But only for a few moments did the struggle last. The savages were no match, despite their superior numbers, for the skillful swordsmen, and with a score of their number unhorsed, dead and dying, they fled like frightened sheep in every direction over the plain.

"Who-rah for the Texan Tigers!" roared Old Bill, leaping outside the defense and waving his hat in a frantic manner; "oh, by the gods of Olympus! wasn't that a sweet fight, boys? See how handsomely them Ingins ponies buckle into the life-savin' business, and how majestically them Tigers slide along arter them, pepperin' the red coyotes' spinal column with revolver shots. Boys, I hav'n't seen anything so gorgeous, so sublime, so heavenly for many a day!"

As the savages fled closely pursued far over the plain, one of the Tigers was seen galloping toward the train.

"Coming to demand our surrender, I presume," said Walden.

"It's the boss Tiger, Tom Brayton," announced Old Bill, as he drew nearer.

"Then Tom Brayton is Tiger Tom?"

"Exactly, captain: but he is anything but a tiger 'cept in a fight."

"I know Tom Brayton: he used to be my guide."

"Then ye know the bravest, noble-hearted kid that ever crossed a Texas prairie," declared Old Proctor.

The ranger approached and drew rein. He seemed somewhat excited. He saluted the party. Mr. Walden did not recognize him till he spoke. Two years had changed his face from that of a boy to a bearded man.

"Mr. Walden," he said, "you are in trouble, I see."

"Yes, Tom," replied the trader, advancing and taking the young man's proffered hand; "we were, but you have relieved us. Tom, what does this mean?"

He pointed to the shield on his breast.

"Ay! Jacquetta asked me the same question with evident mistrust," replied the ranger.

"Then you have seen Jacquetta and Irene?"

"I left them at the ford when we came to your relief; but they are in danger—Indians have fled that way."

"Boys, saddle my horse," commanded Walden, "and I will go after them at once."

"And if you've got a spare critter jist rattle

it around for me," said Old Bill, "and I'll go 'long and help 'scort the gals into camp."

"Hullo, Billy Proctor, you here?" called out the young ranger.

"Just shoot me if I am't on hand like a new kid glove, Tommy, my handsome tiger."

The young ranger smiled. He saw the look of disgust on the freighters' faces. But he had no time to explain the situation.

Two horses, bridled and saddled, were led out.

Walden and Old Bill mounted and rode swiftly away with Tiger Tom the Texan Terror.

"Lord! what if that young scapegrace is leading them into danger?" said Old Abe; "but it can't be possible that he is the human tiger he is reputed to be. He and Old Bill, I see, know each other, and I can't git it out from under my wool but that the old sinner's a deep one."

The three rode on in almost comparative silence toward the ford.

They soon reached the crossing, but the girls were nowhere to be seen.

Tiger Tom dismounted and searched the ground.

A cry suddenly burst from his lips.

"Look there!" he exclaimed, pointing to the ground; "we are too late, Mr. Walden."

"Oh God, help my child!" groaned the trader, claspings his throbbing brow.

CHAPTER III.

DON JUAN GARDASCO.

WE will now return and look after Jacquetta and Irene.

It will be remembered that as the Texan Tigers disappeared in the woods on the north of the river, a party of horsemen appeared on the south side. They were all handsomely dressed in a style of suit worn by the Mexican ranchero. They were well mounted and well armed. They were mostly Americans, although different nationalities were represented in the party.

They all halted on the south bank, and a moment later a carriage or *calesa*, drawn by four horses, came up. One of the horsemen rode back and spoke to some one in the vehicle, then all moved forward and crossed the river.

The maidens were astonished by sight of this regal outfit, and sat silent in speechless wonder and watched the party cross the stream.

When it had reached the bank the *calesa* stopped, the door was flung open, and a man stepped out, and, lifting his hat, bowed with princely grace to the maidens.

And a fine, princely-looking fellow he was, too. He could not have been over eight-and-twenty, though evidently of Spanish birth. He was tall, and well proportioned, with a fine military bearing, long, wavy dark hair, heavy black mustache and imperial, dark eyes and rather a swarthy complexion. He was dressed in a rich and costly suit, his sombrero being banded with gold.

Who he was Jacquetta could not imagine, unless it was some Spanish gentleman traveling for pleasure. She glanced at the panels of the carriage door to see if it bore the gentleman's coat of arms, but there was no insignia thereon.

"Fair senoritas," the elegant gentleman said, in perfect English, "I am both surprised and delighted to meet you. I am Don Juan Gardasco, and presume that one of you is the daughter of Colonel Miller, and the other the daughter of the prairie-trader, Mr. Walden."

"Then you know my father, Colonel Miller?" replied Irene, eager to hear from her father.

"I do, senorita; I have had the honor of knowing him these many years," replied Gardasco; "he has been a brother to me. I owe him a debt of gratitude I can never repay. I reside in Santa Fe, but came with my escort to Fort Concho to visit your father. I found him quite unwell and filled with great anxiety. The Comanches are on the war-path, and the Texan Tigers are also at their bloody work, and it was through fear for the safety of Senor Walden's train that he became so troubled. As most of the garrison is away on an expedition south, no more soldiers could be spared from the fort, else he would have sent an escort out to meet you. Seeing his trouble, I volunteered to come with my *calesa* and followers and escort you to the fort. Just this morning I learned that a band of Comanches, as well as the notorious Tiger Tom, were in ahead of me, and I have been very apprehensive of danger. I hear firing off yonder now; can you tell me what it means?"

"Senor," replied Jacquetta, "the Indians have already attacked the train, and God only knows what the result will be."

"Pardon me, senoritas, but how came you here?"

Jacquetta told him all, even to their meeting with Tiger Tom.

Gardasco manifested some uneasiness.

"Senoritas," he said earnestly, "I pray you will dismount from your horses and take seats in my *calesa* and permit me to escort you at once to Fort Concho."

"Oh, sir, I could not think of doing so without father knowing where I was," replied Jacquetta.

"I will arrange that, Miss Walden—I will send a message to your father with any word you may wish to send him—also, with the full particulars of my coming here. I know he will be rejoiced with the prospect of your speedy escape from danger. Moreover, if your father is hard pressed I can send out a relief from the fort, so you see it is imperative that you should go, and that without delay."

"I want to do what is right and for the best, senor, and before we start I must send father a note."

"Very well, my man Pedro, will deliver your message."

The message was indited on a leaf of Gardasco's diary and placed in the hands of the messenger, who, mounting his horse at once rode away on his mission.

Jacquetta and Irene were then assisted to dismount when half reluctantly they entered the *calesa*. Don Gardasco took a seat in the *calesa* with the girls and gave the order to start. The party faced about, recrossed the river and moved rapidly away.

For several minutes neither of the girls spoke a word. Despite every effort, they could not keep down a vague feeling of doubt and uncertainty. Gardasco seemed to divine their emotions, and as if to dispel the wild fancies born of continued silence, he broke the stillness by saying:

"And you told me, I believe, that you met Tiger Tom to-day?"

"Yes, sir," replied Irene.

"It is a wonder he permitted you to escape his evil power."

"He went to assist our friends, and said he would be back to the ford," Jacquetta responded with evident sadness in her voice.

"Indeed! I am glad you spoke of this," said Gardasco, with no little emotion.

"I do not fear Tom Brayton," Jacquetta declared; "he treated us like a perfect gentleman."

"He has the face of an angel and the heart of a demon, senorita; he is truly a tiger in lamb's clothing. Like the serpent he fascinates before he destroys."

An expression of pain passed over the face of Jacquetta as the man spoke so harshly of one she had so devoutly admired—ay, loved. She would not believe Tom Brayton was an outlaw—she could not believe it, and was very outspoken in expressing her opinion on the subject.

Gardasco became quite uneasy after learning that Tiger Tom was to return to the ford. He gave strict orders to his men to keep a sharp look-out. In the course of some three hours the messenger sent to Walden's camp overtook the party, and riding alongside the *calesa* he lifted his hat and said:

"Senoritas, I had the pleasure of meeting your father, Senor Walden. He is safe still, and much rejoiced to hear of your safety, and delighted with the idea of your going on with us. They defeated the enemy in his attack upon their position; still they are virtually in danger yet, and will not attempt to move for a day or two. Senor Walden sends his compliments to Senor Gardasco, whom he had the honor of meeting at Santa Fe."

The maidens seemed delighted with this news. It removed a burden of doubt and uncertainty from their minds. Their hearts became lighter and they laughed and chatted as only merry-hearted girls could.

Finally the party halted for a few minutes' rest and supper. The escort were provided with rations while Senor Gardasco produced a lunch-basket well filled with substantial food, as well as some delicacies which his fair companions relished with a keen appetite.

It was almost dark when the party resumed their journey. They intended to travel all night, and when the darkness settled around them the maidens crept closer to each other for the gloom settled like a pall around their spirits.

About midnight the moon came up and then the party moved at a rapid pace over the dreary plain.

Suddenly a dark wall seemed to rise up around them. The maidens pressed their faces against the windows of the *calesa* and looked out. High wooded bluffs were on either side of

them. This startled the maidens for they were not aware of their having to travel through mountainous country to reach Concho. Jacquetta was about to speak to Gardasco about it when a horseman came alongside the carriage and tapped on the door.

Gardasco let down the window when the horseman said:

"Senor, we are pursued!"

A cry burst from the maiden's lips.

"By Indians or outlaws?" asked Gardasco.

"Tigers! the Texan Tigers, senor!" responded the man.

Senor Gardasco was visibly excited, yet he spoke a few words of encouragement to the girls, then opened the door of the calesa and leaped out. The maidens heard him giving orders for the escort to fall back and defend the rear at all hazards, adding that he would mount his own horse and keep those of the ladies in readiness should it be impossible to escape with the vehicle.

The calesa rolled on—slowly now, for the defile was narrow, the walls on either side almost perpendicular, and the darkness intense, for the moonbeams had never shone into that narrow pass.

A mile had been passed since Gardasco had left the coach when, suddenly, there rose a strange, startling sound without. It seemed that the mountain was toppling over and falling with the roar and rush of an avalanche into the pass. Gravel showered down upon the top of the calesa, and a large stone crashed through one of the windows, narrowly missing Jacquetta's face. Amid the thunderous crash of falling rock the sharp bark of a pistol was heard, and was followed by a human groan.

Jacquetta and Irene could no longer suppress their pent-up feelings of terror, and a scream burst from their lips, and with their faces buried in their hands they sat expecting each moment to be crushed beneath the falling mountains.

The horses to the calesa dashed away at a lively pace, and in the midst of all a frightful, blood-curdling scream was heard overhead, and a heavy body fell with a crash upon the calesa.

"A panther! A panther! help! help!" rung from the lips of the terrified driver in the box.

"Oh, my God, Irene! a panther has leaped from a ledge upon our driver!" cried Jacquetta; "where is Senor Gardasco? Help! help!"

But no one answered these appeals. The vehicle was swaying and creaking violently. The clattering hoofs of the horses rung sharply through the night. The girls held their breath and listened. They could hear the sounds of the struggle on the calesa—groans, fierce growls and heavy blows.

Suddenly they heard a loud wail from human lips; the calesa swayed violently, and a heavy body fell to the earth with a dull crash, while the horses, as if freed from the restraint of the bits, dashed away at a furious speed.

Was it the driver that had been slain? Jacquetta looked out. Darkness was above and beneath them, save where the spinning wheels ground fire from the stony way, and flashed from beneath the iron-shod hoofs of the flying horses.

CHAPTER IV. DUTCH LUKE.

THE calesa dashed on for quite a ways; then, to the surprise of the terrified girls, came to a sudden stop.

Uncovering their eyes the maidens looked out. They were in a wide, circular opening. The moon was shining in all her splendor around them.

A man leaped down from the driver's box and came and opened the door of the calesa. He was a stranger to the girls—a tall, bearded, rough-looking man.

The maidens at sight of him started back with speechless terror.

"Say, gals," he said, observing their fear, "I'm the panther that bounced your driver, and I'm king pin o' the situation now."

"Who are you?" demanded Jacquetta, for she believed the man was a bloodthirsty outlaw.

"I'm old William Proctor—better known as Ole Bill, and I'm your friend soul and body, gals. Come, if you'd seek freedom and safety."

"We're not captives," replied Irene.

"Oh, but I know you have been, gals; you've been in the power of one of the wust outlaws that ever went unhung."

"What, Senor Gardasco an outlaw?" exclaimed Jacquetta.

"Senor Gardasco, if that's what he called his-

self, is Black Paul Ramardo, the Mountain Bandit."

"Oh heavens, Jacquetta!" cried Irene, "that cannot be possible."

"Wal, it is, gals, sure's there's a God in heaven."

Jacquetta quickly told the old man how they came to be there in the calesa, and in Gardasco's company.

"Wal, he lied to you, gals, like sin, but he can do that every hour in the day. Ye see he's got wind o' yer father's comin' this way and, with Injin confederates and his own gang, come here to plunder the train and carry you gals off. He sent no messenger back to your father to-day, as you say he did. That was only a trick to deceive you and make you willing captives. We struck your trail afore you war a mile from the ford to-day, and follered you right up; and while you were halted about dark some of us got in ahead of you, and burryin' on into these hills, set a trap for Ramardo. We knew there war only one narrow way for him to git in here, and so we piled up a little mountain of rocks and logs on the hillside that a kick would unloosen. And the moment the calesa passed we let go our avalanche and down she rushed, blocking the passage so that the horsemen could not follow up. After this had been done I ran along the pass, took a position on the ledge and when the coach came up, I jumped aboard and lit onto the driver like a duck on a June-bug. But the outlaws'll soon find a way out o' their trouble and follow you, and now, gals, you must take your chances with Old Bill Proctor or Black Ramardo. Which shall it be? Decide quick."

Without a moment's hesitation the girls sprung from the coach. There was something in the old man's bluff, outspoken words that carried to their hearts the conviction that he was a true friend—a feeling they had never fully experienced while with Gardasco.

Slings his rifle at his back by means of a strap, he gave an arm to each of the girls and then the three started off afoot. Old Bill led the way across the moonlit valley and entered a narrow defile where the shadows lay deep and dense.

As they proceeded along, the plainsman narrated all that had transpired since his advent into the freighters' camp up to the moment he had entered the mountains.

"Then Tiger Tom," said Irene, "is not an outlaw as Gardasco would have us believe."

"Nary bit of an outlaw! His name war given him jist beca'se he's a regular tiger after sich men as Black Ramardo, the Bandit, and Long Lance, the Comanche Marauder. And thar may be some chaps that are soldiers that would blacken the name of Tom Brayton, for some of them regulars are jealous of the dashin', independent rangers who outfight any thing on the plains. No, miss, Tom's squar—I swear by him. A braver lad never eat fodder or backed a wild mustang."

"This, I know, is joyful news to Jacquetta."

"Why? Has Tom got her heart, eh?"

"I think she admires him," replied Irene.

"Don't blame her a bit; would too, if I war a gal."

"Mr. Proctor," said Jacquetta, "when do you expect to meet our friends?"

"Don't know, Miss Jack," he replied; "we couldn't tell how our trap'd work, so we couldn't make complete arrangements. But we'll keep skirmishin' around till we meet 'em; never fear 'bout that. But oh! don't you reckon old Ramardo's doin' some swearin' 'bout this hour o' night? With all his weeks o' plottin' and plannin', and all the stately style in which he come to deceive and destroy, he's been thwarted on the very threshold of his mountain retreat. Gals, we're in the Double Mountains now—fifty miles or more out of the way to Concho. Here Ramardo has one of his haunts—his first refuge; but just wait till Tiger Tom gits a fair belt at him and you'll hear Rome howl."

Thus conversing they moved along at a moderate walk. Several miles had been traversed when they halted under a cliff overlooking a wide wooded valley.

"I guess we'd better drop anchor here, gals," Old Bill said, "or we may miss our folks or stumble into danger. Set down thar under that rock, gals, and do the best you can for yourselves. If you can git a nap it'll be a backbone stiffener for a long walk to-morrer. I'll keep watch—be your guardian angel; but I hope when you see me in the mornin' light you won't scream and run away for I warn ye now that I'm as ugly and defunctish lookin' as an old Navajoe squaw. Time's doin' the work for my beauty, gals; I'm gittin' all seamed, banded and

battered up till old Satan wouldn't know me. I arn't afeard o' any gal makin' much love to me."

Despite their situation, the girls could not repress a peal of laughter at the whimsical remarks of the old fellow.

The maidens seated themselves under a low, shelving rock, and tired and weary in body and mind they soon fell asleep in each other's arms.

Old Bill took a position near them as guard. By this time the night was well advanced, and it was a great relief to the fugitives when day at length dawned, although it would doubtless increase their dangers.

"Now, gals," announced Old Bill, "we must have some fodder—somethin' to eat, for we may have a long journey afore us. I hearn wild turkey in the woods 'bout daybreak, and if you'll crawl into that clump of bushes and wait there till I come back, we'll have a royal turkey roast."

Although they did not like the idea of being left alone, the maidens sought the shelter of the cluster of bushes and vines. They were weak and hungry and knew that if they would have to travel far they must have food and strength.

Proctor started off across the valley. He soon came to a little stream where he not only found fresh turkey tracks but that of huge bear, also. Falling back from the creek the old plainsman concealed himself in a thicket on the edge of a little opening some two hundred yards across, and taking a little hollow bone from his pocket, he placed it to his lips and began uttering sounds in exact imitation of a turkey call. This he repeated two or three times when, to his joy, he heard an answer come from the thicket beyond the opening. Again he called and again was he answered, but no turkey made its appearance. But Bill was a patient hunter: he knew the wild turkey was as wary as it was inquisitive, and so bided his time.

Again and again he repeated his call, and every time he was promptly answered from the same spot.

"Dod-blamed queer 'bout that," he mused to himself; "I never see'd a turkey fool 'round so—must be an old resident and up to snuff; or, it may be a Cowmanche or a bandit layin' for turkey too. Seems to me them answers war altogether too prompt for a genuine old gobbler, and therefore, William Proctor, you'd better look a little out, my suckin' dove, or you'd git gobbled up; but I'll try another whet."

He gave the call and was promptly answered from the opposite side of the opening, but a moment later he heard another answer which he was fully satisfied was genuine. It came from the right of the opening, and looking in that direction he was rejoiced to see two large turkey gobblers come strutting from the woods into the opening with head erect, wattles inflated, tail spread and wing-tips dragging on the ground, ready to give battle to the intruding gobblers whose challenging calls they had answered.

The game advanced further and further into the opening, and finally stopped between two clumps of bushes, listened a moment then gave a sharp, defiant gobble. They stood about ten feet apart and were not over a hundred yards from Old Bill. Seeing that now was his golden opportunity, the old hunter raised his rifle, and taking aim at one of the birds fired—the crack of the piece rolling and rebounding loudly through the hills.

When the smoke of the gun had cleared from before his eyes, he saw, to his surprise, that both turkeys were fluttering in their death throes near each other.

"By the winged gods of Olympus!" the old fellow exclaimed to himself, "I didn't kill both them critters for they stood ten feet apart and wer'n't in range neither. Yes, sir-ee, Bill Proctor, thar's another critter over yander and he fired jist as I did. I guess I'll keep a leetle shady and let the varmint show hisself fust. But I reckon he's cogitatin' 'bout now as to who killed the other turkey. It's a peccoliar predicament, cuss my liver-pins if it arn't."

The "varmint," whoever he was, seemed to be in about the same situation of doubt and uncertainty as Old Bill, and did not dare to show himself. Time, however, began to hang heavy on the old hunter, and as his mind reverted to the fair girls waiting his return—depending upon his protection, he concluded that something must be done and that at once. He resolved never to leave without one of the turkeys for breakfast, come weal or woe, and so backing out through the thicket, he crept around—still under cover—until he had placed one of the clumps of bushes near the dead turkeys between him and the spot where he believed his enemy

was concealed; then he crept out of the woods and ran rapidly across the opening and plunged into the first cluster of bushes and stopped to listen. He heard a twig snap before him and parting the bushes he peered through the opening, but saw nothing save the dead turkeys that were lying within ten feet of him. He was about to step out and secure one of these when to his surprise, he saw the bushes on the opposite side part and a round, fat face peer through the opening.

Involuntarily both started back, then, as if actuated by the same impulse, they sprung out, exclaiming *sotto voce*:

"Dutch Luke, by the Olympian gods!"

"Old Pill Proctor, by Shemintly krout!"

The old friends clasped each other's hands and shook them until their very bones cracked.

Dutch Luke was a German hunter and trapper—a low, heavily-built man of fifty with the physical and muscular developments of a perfect Hercules.

"I'll swear, ole sour-krout, you war the last man I expected to meet here," Old Bill exclaimed.

"Same mit me, Pill, and it's one pig wonder I didn't shoot you," replied Luke; "how you pin, Pilly, my ole grapewine?"

"Kersloshin' around same as ever, my dear old beer-tub; but times are lively hereaways now; Comanches and outlaws are up and comin'; got two of the sweetest little gals over here ye ever see'd, Luke—took them from old Ramardo's carriage last night; come and go over with me; bring yer turkey and take breakfast with us and git acquainted with my weemin folks."

"Py sholly I'll do it, vagabone!" replied Luke, wiping off his chin with his sleeve, and then taking up one of the turkeys and waddling along at Bill's side; "I wants to git 'quainted mit some female women, for py Moses, Pilly, I ish goin' to settle down some of dose days."

"That sounds like solid Dutch sense, Luke; stick to it."

They soon reached the point where Bill had left the girls, and found the maidens safe. Bill introduced them to his friend Luke, who, elevating his hands in evident surprise, exclaimed:

"Mein Gott, Pilly Proctor! dose are sherry-bims—angels! I feels my sins on my soul crop out in their presence!"

Old Bill indulged in a low, hearty laugh, and turning to the confused girls, said:

"Gals, you mustn't mind what he says, for he's a wild Dutchman, but a kind-hearted man, and if we've any fightin' to do, he'll be a hull-masked battery and hoss pistol thrown in."

Recovering from their momentary embarrassment, the girls entered into a conversation with him.

Presently the big hunter threw aside his old slouch hat, and going to a spring hard by, made a thorough ablution of his hands and face, combed out his long, tangled hair with his fingers, and then proceeded to assist Old Bill in preparing the turkeys for breakfast.

Hunters and trappers have, in the absence of cooking utensils, a way of their own in preparing and broiling game upon hot coals that imparts a savory richness and juicy tenderness to it, that would tickle the palate of an epicure. Although Old Bill took extra pains on the present occasion, in less than an hour the game was done to a turn, and the party sat down to their breakfast with a sharpened appetite.

Old Luke sat near Irene and kept up a constant flow of whimsical expressions and remarks, in which he was indulged by Old Bill putting in an occasional cross-fire.

In the company of the two jolly old nomads Jacquetta and Irene almost forgot their danger.

Breakfast was finally concluded, and Irene was in the act of rising from her seat, when a sharp, piercing cry burst suddenly from her lips.

"Mein Gott in Himmel!" exclaimed old Luke, "what ish de matters, chile, mit you?"

But no words were required to answer the question, for following the direction of her fixed and startled gaze, Luke saw a monster rattle-snake in the act of coiling itself near the girl, its elevated tail already giving forth its warning rattle.

"Der nasty peast!" blurted Old Luke, and quicker than a flash of lightning his huge hand shot out and seized the serpent by the throat in a vise-like gripe.

Irene sprung to her feet and started back as the great serpent's body wriggled, and wound, and thrashed about the hunter's hand and arm in violent and hostile contortions.

"Look behind you, Irene!" suddenly cried Jacquetta, and, turning, the already terrified

Irene beheld a large bear, that had, no doubt, been attracted there by the scent of the roasted turkey, advancing toward her.

With a bound like a tiger Old Luke sprung between the girl and the bear, and, still grasping the serpent, he swung it aloft like a whip and struck the bear a fearful blow across the eyes with the reptile that caused it to howl with pain.

Maddened by the blow, the bear reared upon its haunches and struck viciously at Luke with its paw. The old hunter, though large and clumsy-looking, was agile as a panther, and, eluding the blow, dropped the now lifeless serpent and dealt the bear a sounding blow on the jaw with his huge fist that sent the beast rolling over upon the ground; and then, before it could recover, Old Bill snatched up his rifle and sent a bullet crashing through the animal's brain, and, as it rolled over a quivering mass, the old hunter exclaimed:

"Whoo-rah, for victory and Davy Crockett!"

"Yaw, py shimminy krout, grapewine!" responded Old Luke, thrusting his thumbs in his pocket and bursting into a laugh that resounded through the hills like the laugh of a satyr, "snakes and bears ish nodings for us; shust call up a few Comanches or outlaws, and then, py sholly, you see dish Dutchmans sphread his—"

Before he could finish the sentence there came, as if in answer to his demands, half a score of Indians from behind a point of rocks, and charged upon them with a fiendish yell!

CHAPTER V.

DOOMED TO A HORRIBLE DEATH.

"To arms, Luke, and fight like a Trojan!" yelled Old Bill Proctor, as he seized his rifle and sprung to meet the foe.

"I ish here mit both arms, py Moses. I ish a yah-hoo-pee!" roared the Dutchman, like a wild bull in the mountains, as he swung aloft his huge fists and planted himself for the conflict.

The Indians were Comanches. They had evidently been attracted there by the report of Old Bill's rifle, and their coming so suddenly upon the whites was almost as much surprise to them as to our friends. They carried neither rifle nor lance, and at first sight of the pale-faces they started back, but seeing there were but two of the foe, they drew their scalping-knives and rushed toward them with fiendish war-whoops.

Old Bill shot the foremost one dead, and Luke, seizing his own ponderous rifle by the muzzle, swung it around with such terrific force as to knock three savages half-stunned fully a rod away. Nor did the Dutchman stop turning, but like a great upright shaft he spun around and around upon his heel, his rifle extended like a great arm, yet sweeping around so fast as to be almost invisible. By this means the old border-man kept a space clear around him. Every red-skin that ventured within reach of that deadly arm was knocked heels over head to the earth.

"Go it, ole sour-krout!" yelled Old Bill, who, clubbing his rifle, was following Luke's example; "give it to 'em, Limburger—whoo-ray, old pard! we're a masked battery and a hoss-pistol thrown in!"

"Yaw, Pilly; I shust begins to sphin; don't let de tam dogs rip you on de stomachs mit der knives—dat's it, Pilly—whoo-raw! dey ish givin' away—victory and hail Columpy! dar dey goes like the tuyvel!"

In less time than it takes to write it two-thirds of the savages were down dead, wounded or bleeding, and the others seeking safety in flight. The invincible frontiersmen had won a bloodless victory that seemed more like the result of a miracle or the interposition of the God of battles than the result of human strength and valor.

But three of the ten warriors had escaped unharmed. Three lay motionless in death, while four others lay writhing and bleeding with broken heads or mashed faces where they had fallen. Old Bill had all he could do to keep Luke from beating out the brains of the wounded, for the Dutchman was mad-wild and frenzied with the taste of blood, as it were—enraged at the loss of his gun, which in the conflict had been broken—the barrel stripped clean of its heavy wooden stock.

"Gott in Himmel, Ole Pill," he exclaimed, smacking his lips. "I ish mad—got a taste of blood—turn loose fourteen tigers, Pilly—anything, so's I can work off dis steam."

"Luke where are those girls?"

"Shimminy krout, I don't know!"

"They're gone!"

"Ish dot so? Der poor little sheeps! Reckon

they git skeart and run away mit themselves, eh?"

True enough the maidens were gone. They had disappeared during the conflict and were now nowhere to be seen.

"We must hunt them up at once, Luke."

"In course, Pilly, and when we finds them I shust tie one of them to my arm and escort her right off to a place of safety."

Old Bill shouldered his gun and started off in search of the girls, followed by Luke with the remains of his rifle.

While nothing of the maidens could be seen the hunters were satisfied of the course they had gone and hurried forward in hopes of overtaking them.

The girls, however, did not keep straight up the valley as the hunters supposed they would, but turned to the left and cut across to the bluff on the opposite side—running like frightened deer; nor did they stop until they reached the hill-top when out of breath they stopped to rest and listen.

By this time all sounds of the conflict had died away. But what had been the result of the battle? Were there any hopes whatever for Bill and Luke in the face of such fearful odds? These were the questions the maidens revolved in their minds. Hope and fear began a struggle in their breasts. The latter won, and rising they hurried on over the hill, descended into and crossed another valley, and then climbed another rugged bluff along whose wooded summit they journeyed for hours.

Suddenly the head-waters of the Double Mountain river with its treacherous quicksands appeared in the valley on their left. They stopped to consult a moment. They concluded to follow down the river in hopes of meeting friends somewhere, and with this intention they descended into the valley.

But, scarcely had they reached the foot of the bluff ere the sound of hoof-strokes fell upon their ears, and glancing in the direction whence the sound came they saw, to their inward joy, Tiger Tom and three of his followers coming down the valley.

A cry of joy burst from the fugitives' lips and they advanced to meet the rangers.

At sight of them Tom Brayton spoke to his men, who at once removed their tiger-face masks, then, with an exclamation of supreme joy the young ranger leaped from his saddle and advanced to meet the girls.

"Thank the Lord, ladies, you are safe," he said excitedly.

"But, oh, Tom! what a dreadful time we have had since we saw you yesterday," cried Jacquetta; "but, Tom, can you tell me anything of my father?"

"He is alive and well, Jacquetta, and is now with the main body of my rangers over in the hills in search of you. But, girls, you are tired and excited. Sit down here and rest yourselves a few moments."

Tiger Tom introduced his friends to the fugitives. They were all young men—fine, robust and daring-looking fellows, perfect types of the Texan ranger. One of them was Manuel La Vega, the second in command of the Tigers. He was evidently of Spanish birth and his lofty mien, his cast of features and his noble, gallant bearing told that he was a descendant of patrician blood.

The rangers held an extended conversation with the maidens in which the latter narrated their perilous adventures, and the story of the cunning manner in which the villain Gardasco had lured them into his power.

"Curses upon that outlaw!" exclaimed Tom, smiting the shield upon his breast as if to give emphasis to his words, "I have been after him for three months, and will pursue him to the ends of earth, but what I have him dead or alive!"

"Those are the words of a bravado," suddenly exclaimed a voice from among the shrubbery on the hillside above them, and the rebuke seemed to issue from the lips of a fiend.

The rangers started to their feet with their hands upon their revolvers.

A sharp quivering whistle—a signal call—rang through the valley, and was almost instantly answered by the clatter of hoofs.

"Good heavens, boys, the outlaws are upon us in force!" cried Tiger Tom, as a desperate determination took possession of him, "and the lives of these girls depend upon our swords!"

Twenty horsemen dashed around the point below with a wild, fiendish yell. At their head rode Paul Ramardo, alias Don Juan Gardasco, his hitherto handsome face transformed into that of a revengeful demon.

There was no alternative but for the rangers

to fight, and even that would seem like criminal folly since the foe were five to one. They might have sought safety in flight but for the maidens, but the brave and gallant youths felt that they could die in no better cause than in defending the lives of those pure and helpless girls.

Four unerring revolvers cracked, and four of Ramardo's bandits fell from their saddles. The outlaw chief's horse stumbled and fell over one of the fallen men's body, and threw his rider headlong to the ground, but in an instant the villain was upon his feet yelling:

"Take Tiger Tom and his lieutenant alive, men! take them alive! for vengeance is mine and I will repay!"

This command was too late to save the life of the two privates, for they had already been shot down, but springing from their horses the outlaws rushed in a body upon Tom and his lieutenant.

The latter drew their swords and faced the foe—fought as men never fought before. Irene and Jacquetta—from where they sat transfixed with terror—witnessed the deadly and unequal conflict. They saw Lieutenant La Vega overpowered and borne to the earth—they saw Tom standing alone seeming to wear a charmed life—possessed of supernatural power. The shield upon his breast flashed in the sunlight, and his sweeping, flaming sword seemed to surround his head with a nimbus of fire—a perfect Jove he appeared hurling his lightning bolts upon the heads of the enraged horde around him. An unearthly light blazed in his eyes and a look not born of the heart of man was upon his noble face and brow. For awhile it seemed that he was a match for them all—that he could not be taken alive. Outlaw after outlaw fell under his deadly blows, but finally his strong arm was arrested in its destructive work, but he was not conquered. Dropping his sword he had recourse to his fists, and for awhile the outlaws tumbled around him like wooden pins. But this exertion was too much for human power, and his strength began to fail. The foe crowded upon him. They tore the shield from his breast and stamped upon it; they tore the handsome jacket from his shoulders and dashed it upon the earth. The shirt on his back was almost stripped from his body. Still the indomitable youth fought on. Unable to conquer him by fair means, foul were resorted to. An outlaw, with a noose on the end of a lariat, slipped up behind him and threw the rope over his head and jerked him off his feet, thus ending the terrible struggle.

But the outlaws had purchased their victory at a fearful cost of blood—several of their number having been slain and not one escaping without more or less injury; and so the cry for vengeance was loud and fierce.

Tom's hands were securely bound at his back as were the young Spaniard's also.

Jacquetta and Irene begged that the life of Tom Brayton and his companion be spared, but Black Ramardo's heart was now hard and cold as steel, and he spurned their petitions with the sneer of a gloating demon.

"I have quit the mercy business," he said, with a brutality so strangely at variance with the suave and gentlemanly language of Don Juan Gardasco, "and henceforth neither male nor female need apply to me for a grain of that article. I'm out, and even if I were overstocked, that Tiger Tom Brayton is the last one on this green earth—under the blue skies, that I'd save—to whom I'd extend mercy. And as to that young Spanish cur, why, he doesn't deserve the prayers of even your sweet lips. He has been a disgrace to his race and I propose to see how he can die. To me revenge is the sweetest gratification on earth."

"Because you have the heart of a fiend," exclaimed Tiger Tom, as defiant as ever even in his bonds.

"Oh, Tom!" cried Jacquetta, turning to the young ranger, "you are suffering all this on my account!"

"It is a glorious cause, then, in which I suffer—ay, am willing to die, Jacquetta."

"I pray that God will yet intercede in your behalf and save you, Tom," the maiden said.

"God has nothing to do with affairs in Texas," an outlaw put in; "Tiger Tom and the devil have been the leading spirits here in the big game of life, but now Paul Ramardo seems to hold the winning hand."

"I say, boys," said Ramardo, as he looked out across the Double Mountain Fork of the Brazos river upon whose banks he stood, "do you see that sand-bar yonder?"

All answered in the affirmative.

"Well, it has no bottom," continued the outlaw leader, "it is a bottomless bed of quick-

sand, and will be a superb place to plant these two royal tigers. Bring half a dozen of the longest lariats and let us do our work and be off with our prizes."

While the lariats were being secured three men were stationed as guards at different points to prevent a surprise while engaged in their hellish work.

Several lariats were tied together making a rope that would reach twice across the river. Two men with one end of it were sent to the opposite side of the stream whose banks were scarcely a foot above the surface of the water. They swam over above the sand-bar and then carried their end of the rope along until it lay across the center of the bar.

The young Spaniard was now led down to the water's edge and a loop in the middle of the rope placed around his body under his arms. Then Ramardo shouted to the men on the opposite side of the pull-away and the young ranger was dragged into the water. Two men then took hold of the rope behind the prisoner, holding it taut yet letting it pay out as the two on the other side dragged the victim to the place of death. In this manner La Vega was forced straight to the sand-bar and when he stood upon the center of it the rope was stretched on either side of him and both ends made fast to trees.

Manuel La Vega now realized most fully his fate. He was to be murdered by inches, as it were—sunk alive in the treacherous sands of the Brazos. The water was not over an inch deep on the bar. He could move up and down the stream a few feet, but could not escape the deadly spot. The moment he stepped he felt his feet sinking in the treacherous sand. He kept tramping back and forth for a few minutes in hopes the outlaws would put a bullet through his brain and end his torture, but they were patient, and the young Spaniard at length resolved to meet his fate and stopped still. Not a murmur escaped his lips when, the moment he stopped walking, he felt his feet sinking in the sand.

In ten minutes the doomed youth had sunk to his waist.

Two outlaws were now sent over to the edge of the sand-bar to cut the rope on either side.

No power on earth could now save Manuel La Vega. The deeper he sunk the faster he went down.

Oh! it was a horrible death yet never a word escaped the lips of the brave young Spaniard.

Ramardo stood upon the bank with folded arms watching, with a hellish smile of satisfaction, the youth go down.

A feeling of horror and awe seemed to silence the outlaws.

A deathlike stillness settled over all.

Tiger Tom stood like one transfixed. His dark hair fell in disordered ringlets about his brow and temples. He seemed to be meditating—his thoughts were on something far away. He turned his head and his eyes met those of Jacquetta and a thrill shot through his frame as though an angel of God had whispered words of love and cheer to his desponding soul. A radiance that seemed to shine out beyond the darkness of death flooded his spirit with the light of hope. He glanced again toward his dying friend, but at once turned his eyes to shut out the dreadful sight.

Then followed a few minutes' silence.

A strange sound came from out in the river.

Then the outlaws seemed to draw a breath of relief, and there was a stir of feet and murmur of voices.

"He died game," Black Ramardo was heard to say.

Tom lifted his eyes and glanced out over the river. A hat floating slowly away on the current was all that he saw.

Manuel La Vega had gone down to death in the quicksands.

"Now prepare the rope," commanded the outlaw chief, "and let us see if his leader, Tiger Thomas, can die as game!"

CHAPTER V.

WHAT OLD LUKE FOUND IN THE HAMMOCK.

THE outlaws tied the rope together and again stretched it across the river and over the sand-bar.

Tiger Tom was then forced to the river's edge, tied to the rope, and dragged through the water over to the death-mire.

Jacquetta watched them at their fiendish work, a strange expression coming over her pale, distressed face. Finally, she dashed the tears from her eyes and sprang to her feet. Advancing, she bent over the body of a dead ranger, and lifted a revolver from his belt; then,

with a cry like that of a maddened spirit, she bounded forward, and raising the weapon, shot one of the outlaws at the rope dead.

With a curse one of the freebooters turned to seize the girl, whose timid, womanly gentleness had been transformed into that of a desperate, determined spirit, but the villain paid the penalty of his violence with his life. The now fully-aroused girl knew how to handle a revolver, and the unearthly light in her eyes and the expression on her lovely face told the outlaws they had another desperate enemy to deal with; but before they could secure and disarm her, two rifles, up on the hillside overlooking the scene, rung out, and the report was followed by yells that seemed to issue from brazen lungs and strike confusion into the ranks of the foe.

The next moment Old Bill Proctor and Dutch Luke, the former with a revolver in each hand, the latter with the heavy gun-barrel with which he had done such fearful work a short time before, came charging down upon the outlaws.

At the same time six mounted Texan Tigers dashed around the brow of the hill, and were upon the foe before the latter were aware of the situation.

A desperate and sanguinary contest ensued, but taken thus by surprise in the moment of fancied security, the outlaws were defeated, and the survivors sought safety in flight. Unfortunately, Paul Ramardo was among those to escape, he having mounted his horse the moment Old Bill and Luke made their presence known, in hopes of getting away with one of the girls.

"Save him! save him!" cried Jacquetta, pointing across toward Tiger Tom, who had already sunk in the death-sands up to his knees.

The rangers sped on in pursuit of the outlaws, but Old Bill and Dutch Luke, who were aware of Tom's perilous situation at once began measures for his release. They unfastened the end of the rope and running down the river essayed to pull him from the grasp of the mire.

The rout of the outlaws had inspired the young ranger with hope. His feet and legs were incased in high-topped boots reaching halfway between his knees and hips. The tops of these were still above the water, and his only hopes of escape lay in being able to pull his feet out of his boots. He shouted to the two old bordermen to pull with all their power, and as they did so, he made a desperate effort himself and his hopes were realized. In the language of Old Luke, they "shust jerk him bald-headed out of his boots."

As the young ranger made his way to the shore cheer after cheer pealed from the lips of his rescuers.

As he stepped onto the shore, Jacquetta, unable to restrain her emotions of joy, threw her arms about his neck and kissed his pale cheek as she murmured a prayer of thanks.

The old frontiersmen hugged each other like school-boys and danced with joy.

"Victory is ours again, sour-kroot," exclaimed Old Bill, wild with his emotions of triumph.

"Dot ish so, grapewine, bless Gott in Himmel," replied Luke.

The rangers returned from pursuit of the outlaws. An explanation of affairs was given them by Jacquetta and Tom, after which Old Luke turned to the girls and said:

"What fur you little geeses skip out and leave us over yon? Me tinks you sthand behind us and see me put in my pest lick on them Inshurs. Oh, shimminy kroot! we shust more'n raise ter tuyvil mit dem tam skunks, gals—echo p dem all out—splatter der carcasses all ofer Texas!"

"We are rejoiced to know you were victorious, Luke," Irene replied, "but the odds were so great against you that we got scared out of our senses and fled—you must pardon us."

"I vill, py shimminy kroot, for thar's nodings shmall 'pout Ole Luke Shoofstahl but his mouth—yaw! yaw! yaw!" and the old fellow's great form shook in a convulsion of laughter.

The dead rangers were interred where they had fallen, and then the outlaws' arms and deserted horses were secured. Jacquetta and Irene were mounted upon two steady animals when the whole party set off up the river in hopes of joining the main body of Texan Rangers before Ramardo had time to rally his forces and attack them again. It was well known that the outlaws now had a hundred or more Comanche Indians to back them in their persecutions of the Tigers.

Old Bill and Dutch Luke were sent out in advance of the party on foot to act as scouts, for every precaution against surprise must now be taken. They followed a course that gradually led them away from the river, and had jour-

neyed perhaps two miles when Old Luke, who was in advance of Bill and moving along the base of a high bluff, was suddenly brought to a stand by a strange, peculiar sound.

"Making an ear-trumpet of his huge hand he listened intently.

Again he heard the sound.

"Py shimminy krout!" he exclaimed to himself, "dot sounds like a cry—like a weeny paby cry—must be soom trick, or a paby panther's cry—yah! dere he goes some more—dot's a real meat paby's cry, py shimminy krout!"

The old hunter stooped and peered around under the branches of the trees. A short distance ahead of him he saw a horse hitched. He moved toward it. That cry grew plainer. It was like the cry of an infant in pain.

As he advanced still closer Old Luke saw that the horse was an Indian pony covered with a saddle and Indian trappings. And to a limb hard by he saw a small Indian hammock, made of fibrous bark wrought in handsome colors, swaying to and fro in the gentle breeze drifting up the valley. From this hammock came those infantile cries.

Luke crept closer, and seeing no one around, advanced and peered into the hammock. To his utmost surprise he saw it contained an infant child of perhaps three months old. It was an Indian baby, and crying as though suffering great pain and distress.

The old hunter's heart was touched with pity, and, dropping his gun-barrel, he tenderly lifted the infant from the hammock, and holding it at arm's length in his big hands, he regarded it with arched eyebrows and open-mouthed wonder.

"A real paby," the old fellow said to himself, as he looked it over with that serio-comical expression, "a real meat paby, by shimminy krout!"

"Hullo, Luke, what ye found, ole sour-mash?"

It was Old Bill Proctor who, approaching unseen, asked the question.

"Sh! spheak stiller mit dot tam pig mouth, grapewine!" exclaimed Luke, in an undertone; "it ish a paby."

"A baby?"

"Yaw, a paby—a real shackass of a little dumplin' paby—keep back, grapewine, dot ugly face ob yours will skeer it mos' into spasmodics; nor don't touch it, Pill, mit your pig rough hands—you too mooch awkward to hold sich a dainty little sherrub—coom and look at him, Pill."

Old Bill advanced on tip-toe to the side of his friend, and, as Luke held the child in his hand as though it were something likely to vanish at a breath, it was as amusing as it was touching to see the two rough old bordermen tenderly gazing down into its face. The child had hushed its cries, and its pretty round face and big innocent eyes touched a chord in the hearts of the men that perhaps had never before filled with such emotions.

While the old men were thus regarding the infant, the rest of the party came up, and for several minutes the little waif was the center of attraction and wonder. But Old Luke, the self-appointed god-father for the time being, would permit no one else to touch it. He assumed full control and authority, declaring it was his by right of discovery until claimed by its maternal owner.

Presently, however, the child began to kick and squirm—almost wriggling itself out of Luke's hands. With the frantic efforts of a boy trying to hold an eel, Old Luke maintained his hold on the baby, which, however, had kicked its bare feet and fat legs clear of the shawl, and was now pawing the air with both hands and feet and crowing lustily.

"See der little shack—sinner!" the Dutchman exclaimed, "der little shap's flyin' all to pieces! Py sholly! isn'd dot poss? I wonder if dose leetle feets vill effer foller der path of sin, or dose leetle hands ever strike mit anger? Innocent paby! Old vagabone, Pill Proctor, don't you wish you shust as eenocent as dot leetle rooster?"

Old Bill heaved a sigh and nodded his head.

To the spectators it seemed strange that the emotions of one who, but a few hours before, stood up a perfect Hercules beating down men in the passion of deadly vengeance, could be overcome—subdued, as it were, into womanly tenderness and child-like gentleness by the presence of a tiny bit of infant humanity.

Presently the baby began to cry and cram his chubby fists into his mouth.

"Shoo-oo!" exclaimed Old Luke, "der leetle shap's gittin' hungry—wants somedings to eat—some fodder."

"His mother must be around somewhere," said Tiger Tom; "maybe she is hiding within hearing afraid to approach while we are here. I shall walk up the valley a ways and see if I can find trace of any one."

So saying he started off up the defile. He followed along in a goat path which led him half-way up the hillside on the right and then along a bench or ledge that wound around the bluff. A dense growth of shrubbery covered the whole face of the slope. Even the path he was following finally became obstructed with clumps of bushes, but while picking his way noiselessly forward his ears were suddenly greeted by the sound of a voice. He stopped to listen. He heard two persons in conversation a short ways ahead of him.

Creeping forward on hands and knees—silent as a phantom—he soon came in sight of a man and woman. They were standing in an open spot on the ledge across which ran the *cimmaron* path.

The woman was evidently an Indian, though her dress and even her language were evidence of some ideas of civilization. She was young, with dark flashing eyes, long black hair and a face decidedly handsome, though wearing an expression that denoted great inward emotions.

The man with whom she stood face to face was the outlaw chief, Black Paul Ramardo.

Tom soon discovered that unfriendly words were passing between the two, and in hopes of getting the drift of their conversation he crept on to within easy earshot of them.

Peering through the vines and bushes he saw Ramardo's face was black with rage and anger, while the look of a haughty, defiant queen was upon that of the woman.

"Why have you dogged me here at this time?" Tom heard the villain ask.

"I come to thwart your designs," the woman, in substance, replied; "through one who is my friend I learned that you sought the daughter of a prairie merchant for a wife, when but two years ago I became your bride whom you promised you would honor and protect with all your love and manhood. To become your wife, I, the daughter of a Comanche chief, deserted my people and went to live with others; but what has been my sorrow and suffering? The coward's blow have you struck me more than once, Ramardo. You have reproached me of my low birth and savage instincts when my mother was a pale-face woman. Then when I became the mother of your child, you deserted me—left me alone among strangers to fight my own way the best I could. But I followed you. The Comanche blood in my veins is running hot. I am not a dog to be treated as such although I have submitted to a condition worse than a slave, and now you would desert me for another."

"What the devil would you have me do?" thundered the outlaw, in a furious tone.

"Nathalia would have her white husband quit the life he leads and go with her to the village of her own people."

"Humph!" sneered the man, "do you think I would live with the dogs of Comanches?"

"Once you were not above crawling into their kennel and stealing away one of their young and happy girls," Nathalia replied, with stinging sarcasm.

"I hope God will forgive me for it," replied Ramardo, "and so you can take your child and go to your people. I will not live with a tiger-squaw."

"Beware!" the woman exclaimed, with all the bitterness of one whose love had been scorned; "you shall yet feel the tiger's claws, Paul Ramardo!"

"Ah ha! you threaten me, then," the villain replied, with a villainous look in his snakish eyes; "by the gods, we might just as well settle this thing here and be done with it!"

He grasped his revolver. Murder was in his heart. Tiger Tom saw and heard him, and having anticipated the villain in his murderous intentions, was ready for him with a cocked revolver, and before the villain could execute his bloody threat, the young ranger's weapon rung out and Ramardo, staggering backward, fell and rolled like a log down the hillside. But unfortunately the villain had only been stunned. Having to shoot through the shrubbery the bullet from Tom's revolver was deflected and only cut skin deep along the outlaw's temple, and before our hero could get himself into position to fire a second shot, the villain had regained his feet and fled like a wounded buck.

Nathalia was joyfully surprised by this turn in affairs, and turning, she found herself face to face with her rescuer, Tiger Tom.

"That was a narrow escape for you," Tom said.

"The pale-face saved my life—he is good. Nathalia is the daughter of Long Lance, the Comanche war-chief, and she will go to her father's lodge and tell him of Ramardo's crimes and of her rescue from death by—"

"Tiger Tom," added the youth, seeing she hesitated.

"Tiger Tom!" the woman exclaimed, and she started back as if from danger, then recovering her composure, she continued: "but Tiger Tom does not make war on women and children."

"No; you've nothing to fear from me, but you want to look out for that husband of yours. He's a devil, and it seems that with all my skill with the revolver I cannot bring him down. He seems to wear a charmed life."

"He is a bad man, and Nathalia's love is now hate for him, and she will live to seek revenge, even though he is the father of my child."

"Then that is your babe in the hammock down the valley?" Tom remarked.

"Yes, mine and his; but I must go back, take my child and go on to my father's village that I left two years ago."

Together the two returned to where she had left her horse and child. The woman was somewhat surprised by the presence of so many whites, and with no little shyness she approached the hammock, lifted her babe therefrom and walking away sat down to nurse it.

"Indian though she is, friends," observed Tom thoughtfully, "she has the shadow of a great sorrow resting on her heart, and that villain Ramardo is responsible for it all."

"Mein Gott!" exclaimed Old Luke fiercely, "if I gits one lone shance at dot willain I puts one shadow over his soul, I vill, by shimminy krout!"

"It seems that the ornery cuss ar'n't to be killed, sour-krout," said Old Bill in a regretful tone.

"The vengeance of that wronged woman will overtake him now," said Tom Brayton, "for they say that 'hell hath no fury like a woman scorned.'"

"Dot's right—glory in der sphunk, by shimminy krout!"

"Friends, we had better be moving," said Tom; "time is precious, and the sooner we find our friends the better for us."

The young ranger went over to where Nathalia sat and warned her of the danger that surrounded her, and asked her to accompany them, but this she refused saying that she would go at once in search of her father, Long Lance, whom she knew to be in the hills somewhere. So bidding her good-by, Tom and his friends took their departure.

The party ascended a long gradual hill that finally brought them to a high wooded ridge or plateau extending southward for miles. Along this they had journeyed perhaps half a league when to their joy they were met by the main body of Texan Tigers accompanied by Mr. Walden.

The meeting was one of supreme joy, and cheer after cheer pealed from the lips of the rangers and rung in startling echoes through the mountains.

After Mr. Walden had heard from Jacquetta's own lips the story of their adventure, with Black Ramardo, and their rescue by Old Bill Proctor and the Texan Tigers, he went to Tiger Tom, and taking him by the hand said:

"Tom Brayton, I owe all this to you and brave Old Bill Proctor, and shall never be able to repay you. But, Tom, I hope you will forgive me of the past as I forgive you."

"Ay, Mr. Walden, I fear you do not know all," replied Tom.

"What do you mean, Tom?" asked Walden with a puzzled look.

"No matter now, Mr. Walden," answered the ranger as though he regretted having said so much, "I will reveal all to you at another time—let us move on and go into camp where game for food can be obtained, for there's not a mouthful of rations in all this party."

"All right, Tom," replied Walden, though the ranger's remarks had thrown the deep shadow of a mystery around him—Tom—that even seemed to involve Jacquetta.

"Let's go over to der ole fort," suggested Old Luke, who had overheard Tom's last suggestion.

"That's the place, sour-krout," put in Old Bill, "it's a stone inclosure, folks, that war built thar twenty years ago by a party o' prospectors who war s'rounded by Ingins. Thar's a spring inside of it, and fuel near and it 'll be a bunkim-squintum place to camp. It's not far away."

The party at once set off for the fort where

they soon arrived in safety. The place was, indeed, a good defense. Fully a quarter of an acre was inclosed by a stone wall five feet high. The spring inside was clear and cool, furnishing an abundance of water for man and beasts.

The only thing wanting now was game for food, and Old Luke and Bill, and three of the rangers who were expert hunters, at once set out in search of this.

Deer, goats, bear and turkey abounded throughout the Double Mountains and soon the report of the hunters' guns told that the wants of the party were being supplied.

In the course of an hour the redoubtable Dutch Luke returned with nearly the entire carcass of a young bear, and soon he was followed in by the others with two fine deer and six turkeys.

While the game was being dressed by the hunters, fires were lighted, and soon the savory odors of broiling meat filled the air and sharpened the appetite of the half-famished rangers who had had nothing to eat for twenty-four hours.

After all had fared sumptuously the subject of possible future dangers came up; and it became a question involving some difference of opinion as to whether they should resume their southward journey at once, or remain at the fort until the morrow to rest up the over-worked horses. But the discussion was suddenly brought to an abrupt termination by a fiendish, blood-curdling cry that seemed to issue from a thousand demon throats without.

Full well the party knew what it meant. The Indians and outlaws, a hundred strong, had sprung, as if by magic, from the earth and were endeavoring to carry the fort by storm.

CHAPTER VI.

A CONFERENCE.

"To arms, boys!" shouted Tiger Tom, as the yelling horde rushed toward the fort.

"Hurrah, boys! or off goes our ha'r!" yelled Old Bill Proctor.

"Whoo-raw, for a pig time! py shimminy krou!" put in the lion voice of Old Luke, as, with a rifle in each hand he rushed to the stone wall.

Accustomed to the sudden dangers of the prairies and hills the young rangers were ever ready for such emergencies. Every man had his rifle at his side, and in the twink of an eye, almost, the whole band was at its post pouring a deadly fire into the ranks of the foe.

It had doubtless been the intention of the enemy to surprise the whites while at dinner, but the result of the attack was a complete surprise to them for they were met with such a deadly fire that they were thrown into confusion and forced to retreat with greater speed than they had advanced and with the loss of at least a score of their bravest warriors.

To husband their ammunition supplies the whites ceased firing as soon as the red-skins and outlaws were beyond an uncertain distance. This enabled Long Lance and Ramardo to rally their followers before they had become hopelessly panic-stricken, and when this had been accomplished, the two leaders held, within plain view of the besieged, a consultation. This lasted five or ten minutes, when Long Lance mounted a fallen log and delivered a wild and excited harangue to his braves, which was followed by a speech from Ramardo. What they said, our friends of course could not hear, but both speeches were followed by wild, fiendish yells, and a movement as if preparing for another attack.

But whatever movement the foe had on foot it was suddenly interrupted by the appearance of a woman with a child on her back on the ridge between them and the fort.

"By shimminy krou! dot ish dot Inshun woman mit der leetle paby!" declared Old Luke.

"So it is," replied Tiger Tom.

The woman held up her hands as she faced the Indians and outlaws, as if in mute appeal.

Long Lance advanced to meet her, not knowing that it was his own child, whom he had mourned as dead, until he stood before her. When he recognized his own Nathalia, a cry burst from his lips, as though startled by an apparition from the grave.

Nathalia spoke to him. The chief recovered from his shock, and the scene of affection that followed we will not attempt to describe. They were not over two hundred yards from the fort, and our friends were moved by the demonstrations of joy and happiness that proved to them that the savage heart was capable of the tenderest of human emotions.

This meeting of father and child lasted fully

ten minutes, and when it was ended, to the surprise of all, they turned toward the fort.

Long Lance held up his hands, palms outward, both empty.

"Ah!" exclaimed Tom, "that means friendship and peace. Folks, the chief desires a conference, I am sure."

"Py shimminy krou! I shust like to conference dish gun-barrel over his head," said Old Luke.

"Keep cool, Lukesie, my ole sour-mash," advised Old Bill, "and mebbby that chief'll do somethin' to our advantage."

Tom sprung upon the wall and held open his hands in reply to Long Lance, who, with Nathalia, at once advanced with fearless step toward the fort. When they came up, they were admitted to the inclosure. The chief was in war-paint, and seemed greatly agitated, though his emotions were not of a violent nature. Nathalia carried her baby in a shawl slung at her back. She was looking so tired and distressed that Jacquetta and Irene, moved to pity for the poor savage girl, tendered her their kind assistance, for which she seemed very grateful.

Tom advanced and extended his hand to the chief, who, looking the young ranger straight in the eye, asked:

"You Tiger Tom?"

"Yes; and you are Long Lance, the Comanche chief," replied the ranger.

"Yes, me Long Lance—come to talk with pale-faces."

Tom called Mr. Walden, Old Bill and Luke, and made known the chief's wish to them, when the five sat down in a circle upon the ground. The chief coming there as he did, and the mingled look of joy and sadness on his savage face, banished all suspicions of foul play or treachery from the breast of our friends.

"Let Long Lance speak," said Tiger Tom, "and the pale-faces will listen."

"Long Lance," began the chief, "has been the enemy of the white rangers and their friends, and—"

"Py tam! why don't you tells us soomdings we don't know, poss?" interrupted Old Luke, and but for the prompt intercession of Tiger Tom there is no telling what else he would have said.

"And the Comanches," continued the chief, without appearing to notice the interruption, "have been the friends of the white chief you call Black Ramardo, the outlaw. But Long Lance has found him to be a bad man—a serpent warmed to life by our camp fires to destroy the happiness in my heart. His daughter there was once fairer than the flower that blooms in the valley, with a voice sweeter than the music of the birds, but the pale-face lured her away and made her his wife. Long Lance knew not where she had gone, but believed she was dead until to-day, when she came to me yonder and told me all—of her suffering and the cruelty of the outlaw chief. And during the most of the two years that I have mourned my child as dead, Black Ramardo has been often in our village—sat in our councils, eaten salt with us, and been in our full confidence while seeking our stronghold as a refuge from his enemies, yet he has never once intimated that my child lived—that he had stolen her away and kept her worse than a slave where she could not return to her people!"

"He ish one tam pig schroundrel, py shimminy krou!" raved Old Luke, unable to restrain his emotions longer.

"Silence, malt-tub," said Old Bill; "hear the chief through."

"To-day," Long Lance resumed, "my child, on her way back to the village of her father, met her husband and asked him to go with her to her people and quit the life he leads. He swore at her, and when she threatened to expose his villainy, he attempted to murder her. Tiger Tom knows this, for it was he who saved my child's life. Long Lance is now the deadly enemy of the white outlaw, and his scalp will hang at my girdle before the sun goes down."

"Fully for you, shief, pully!" exclaimed Old Luke, slapping the Comanche a friendly blow on the shoulder, "I hopes dot you skin his whole he'd slick and clean, I do, by shimminy krou!"

"If he mistrust the object of your visit here, he may be gone when you return," said Tom.

"Then my warriors will follow him to the setting sun," the chief replied; "but Long Lance now promises the pale-faces here his friendship, though many of his braves have fallen by their rifles. You can all depart from here in safety. A Comanche can be as grateful as a pale-face. A pale-face saved my child, now Long Lance will

save that pale-face and his friends. I have spoken."

The chief rose to his feet.

"Whoo-raw! for Long Lance!" shouted Old Bill.

"And whoo-aw, for his gal and dot leetle kid of a paby!" shouted Old Luke, tossing his old hat into the air and dancing around like an overgrown school-boy.

In the course of a few minutes more the chief and his daughter left the fort and returned to their friends.

"Boys, any danger of treachery there?" asked Walden.

"None whatever," replied Tom Brayton; "in some cases Long Lance might prove treacherous, but this is one in which all that is honorable in the heart of even a savage has been reached. I will be responsible for all harm that comes to us through the agency of Long Lance and his warriors."

"Bless der Lord, from whom all goot dings flow," said Luke, reverentially, "but, ole grape-wine Pilly, I ish afraid we no haf a goot, solid fight."

"I should think you'd had enough fighting," observed a ranger.

"Oh, Sherasalem, poy! dose war shust a leetle brush of a fights. You shust ought to see me mit my danders up. I ish a whole shack-ass team mit a pull-dog unter der wagon."

When long lance returned to his friends it was with the avowed purpose of wreaking a terrible vengeance on Black Ramardo, but that worthy was too shrewd and cunning for the chief. He had witnessed the meeting of the chief and Nathalia, and at once made up his mind as to the final result. Their visit to the fort strengthened his convictions and increased his fears, and taking advantage of the chief's absence at the fort, he called his followers together and hurried away—taking a circuitous route to the open plains, there to lie in wait for the coming of the Texas Tigers with the girls, both of whom Black Ramardo had taken an oath to possess.

And little dreaming of further dangers, our friends packed up their effects, mounted their horses, filed out of the little fort and started southward toward the point where Walden had left his train intrenched on the banks of the Red Fork of the Colorado.

CHAPTER VII.

BATTLE OF THE PHANTOMS.

It was morning of the day following that of the events narrated in the preceding chapter, but the sun was not shining. A dense fog hung over the hills and prairies of Texas—so dense, indeed, that objects could not be seen a hundred yards away. Old Bill Proctor had not seen the likes of it before in all the years he had been on the southern pampas. It made traveling dangerous in an enemy's country. There was no telling what moment a horde of ambuscaded foes might leap from their covert; yet, despite all these dangers, Tiger Tom and his rangers and friends pursued their journey southward across the plain through the gloomy fog.

The spirits of all were buoyant and happy. Since leaving the fort in the hills, they had met with no dangers or troubles.

The entire party was mounted, though it was plainly evident that Old Luke was as much out of his element in the saddle as a fish out of water, and the figure cut by the old hunter was extremely amusing and comical.

Old Bill Proctor rode in advance with a young ranger—ever on the alert for danger—far more vigilant and careful since the fog had enveloped the plain.

Tiger Tom and Jacquetta spent much of the time together. Mr. Walden looked upon their intimacy with no little regret. He could not bear the thought of ever giving up his child to another, however worthy the latter might be. Still he said nothing to interrupt the friendly relations between the young people—in fact, he could not afford to wound the feelings of Tiger Tom who had been the leading spirit in rescuing his child, and upon whom they must continue to depend until out of all dangers.

By some cause, either accidental or intentional, the horse assigned to Luke Shoofstahl was a bronco in which all the meanness peculiar to that animal was fully developed, and as the day advanced, Sparrowhawk became tired and restive under its unnatural burden of over two hundred pounds avoirdupois of ungainly Dutchman, and suddenly began to manifest a disposition to get rid of its burden by the process of "bucking." But Old Luke was not so easily

got rid of, and locking his legs about the animal's body and his arms about its neck, he reared out:

"Whoa, here! you tam Dutch sheeps, what fur you shumps dose way mit me, hey! Whoa, I say! or py shim'ny kroust, I gits off and mauls Texas mit you, you infernal shackass, you!"

"Hold on, sour-kroust!" yelled Old Bill Proctor, indulging in an outburst of laughter at the ludicrous performance of man and pony; "lean t'other way, Luke, she's tilting up behind."

"Dunderation and lightnin'! go to pigatory mit yer tam big ole mouth, grapewine, or you shust as well—whoa, here, you dog-goshed sheeps, what fur you shumps like a stool, eh?—who—"

As the last word fell from his lips the bronco reared upon its hind feet and Luke rolled to the ground like a log, while the pony, kicking up its heels, galloped away over the plain.

After a hearty laugh at Luke's discomfiture, several of the rangers attempted to catch the bronco, but the animal was swift of foot and one of those cunning, sagacious critters that defied every attempt to recapture it. It would not leave the party, but kept off just far enough to insure its own chances of liberty. There was, really, but one fletcher animal in the party, and that was the one ridden by Tiger Tom, and after it had been fully demonstrated that the animal must be caught by running it down, Tom said:

"I'll lasso the cunning thing."

Tom Brayton was an expert mustanger. There were few, if any, on the great southern llanos that excelled him in throwing the noose. Even now he carried a lasso—he always carried one—at the side of his saddle-bow, and as he spoke, he unfastened the rope and gathered it up in his hand ready for action. But just as he was about riding away toward the bronco, Old Bill came riding from the front at a goodly pace, and reining up before the young ranger, said:

"Folks, we've got to look close, for thar's scads of fresh hoss-tracks before us, and the fust thing we know a pack o' outlaws will bust out o' this fog onto us like demons out o' darkness!"

This startling news seemed to paralyze every heart, and for a moment fear blanched every face. Involuntarily all eyes turned toward Tiger Tom. To him they looked as their leader.

At once the young ranger divided his men into two parties, which were formed into parallel lines, with Jacquetta and Irene riding between.

Old Bill and Luke were sent on in advance as scouts. A ranger was left behind to guard the rear against surprise, and in this manner they pushed on through the dismal fog.

They had gone perhaps a mile, when suddenly there came a burst of firearms from the fog on the right, as though fifty rifles mingled their reports in one volley. Bullets whistled above the heads of our friends, and two of the rangers sustained slight wounds.

In an instant Tiger Tom had formed his men ready for a conflict—expecting a charge from the unknown foe. But to their surprise no one appeared, and not knowing the strength of the fog-ambushed enemy, the rangers would not run the risk of a charge since they had those two fair girls depending upon them.

The situation, however, had become extremely dangerous. The fog seemed to thicken, which gave the pursuers an advantage over the pursued.

"Do you think it were Indians that fired upon us, Tom?" Mr. Walden asked, as they continued their journey.

"No; it is Black Ramardo's band following us," replied Tom. "I feel confident that Long Lance would not break his word with us, and there can be no other Indians within a hundred miles of here."

"Think you that Ramardo's band is strong in numbers as we are, Tom?"

"They may not have any more men, but they have a decided advantage over us. We have got to act on the defensive in order to protect those girls, while the outlaws can harass us all the while by sudden dashes. The fog then is in their favor, and against us, but with Old Bill Proctor and Dutch Luke on the alert, we may be able to avert any serious trouble."

The air was so dull and heavy that sounds could not be heard at any great distance, and at times the fog rolled in black clouds across the plain, thickening almost into spray.

There had not been a breath of air all that morning, but as the day advanced a gentle breeze finally drifted across the plain from the south, stirring the fog into low, flying clouds.

"If the wind will rise," said Tiger Tom, "this impenetrable gloom may be dispelled."

And this prediction all thought was likely to soon come true, for as the wind continued to blow the fog began to rise, and the range of vision to extend over the plain. And with the gloom of the weather the gloom that overshadowed the spirits of all began to depart, and their hopes were running high, when suddenly Old Bill Proctor reined in his horse, and pointing off to the right, exclaimed:

"Look there!"

Every eye turned quickly in the direction indicated, and to their horror beheld at least three score horsemen drawn up in line on the plain as if ready for a charge. They were not over half a mile away.

"By heavens! they are Indians!" exclaimed Walden, turning to Tiger Tom.

"That shows the honor of Long Lance!" cried Old Bill.

"Yaw! be one tam nice old rhooster," added Luke, "and I vish now I pounds der mountains plack and plue mit his ole carcass, I do, py shim'ny kroust!"

"Well, friends," said Tom, "if that chief has deceived us it is the first case of the kind I ever met where Indian gratitude was turned into bloody treachery. They are Indians I'll admit, but what do the mean? Can it be possible that they are after Ramardo?—covering our retreat?"

"Plue plazes and purgatory, Tiger Tom! do you thinks such dings be probable even if possible?" asked Old Luke.

"I do, Luke," replied the ranger emphatically.

"Den der millinium's comin' and I want to die mit my poots off."

"Hold on, ole sour-mash," put in Bill Proctor; "I'm thinkin' you'll have a chance to die with yer boots on yit afore you git out of this, you bloody ole Dutchman."

The Indians were barely discernible and in a few moments they were concealed from view altogether by the wind falling and the fog settling back darker and denser than ever over the plain.

"My God! what is to become of us?" exclaimed Mr. Walden in a tone of disparagement.

"Keep up courage and fight your way through," replied Tiger Tom, "has ever been the slogan of the Texan Terror, and we have never been in a scrape yet but what we were able to get out with flying colors, and with God's help we'll get out of this difficulty."

A halt was made though no one dismounted. They had hoped the fog would soon rise again and enable them to more clearly define the situation. But their hopes were all in vain. The gloom continued to thicken around them, though far up overhead it seemed to be growing lighter.

"Just as well that it all comes down," said Tom; "for you can see there's light above. If the sun gets out once then away goes the fog and gloom."

"Pully!" exclaimed Luke, "for when it gits light ole Pilly Proctor and I will scharge over dose prairie like mad pulls in der mountain and skeer effery tam Inshin clear into der hill mit ter tuyvil—Oh, see! py sholly! see dose plack cloud-bank!"

He pointed westward where through the gray fog all could see a long cloud-bank black as midnight lying low against the western sky.

"That's not a cloud—it's a ridge, you ole blind Dutchman," exclaimed Bill Proctor.

So indistinct did the dark line showing through the gloom appear that Tiger Tom was not really certain whether it was a ridge or cloud-bank, but while watching it a dim shadowy form of giant proportions, and resembling a horseman, was seen to rise up out of the dark line and float along the surface like a patch of detached cloud.

"That's a hossman!" cried Old Bill.

"It's too large for a horseman, Bill," replied Walden.

"It's simply a floating cloud that has assumed the shape and form of a man and horse," observed a ranger; "who of you, when boys, hav'n't lain and seen in the scuddin' clouds troops of horsemen go plunging through the sky?"

"Py shimminy kroust, boys!" interrupted Old Luke, "it's a phantom horseman!—lookeel der goes a whole squadron ob dem."

True enough, up out of the cloud or ridge, whichever it was, suddenly rose two score more of those dim, shadowy forms. They were drifting southward and had all the appearance of Titan horsemen—"demons in the gloaming."

Superstition is as natural to the plainman as it is to the seaman. It will come upon them no difference what their education may have been—through associations. The rangers looked upon the floating figures with shuddering awe, but not so with their leader, Tiger Tom. He was convinced that those forms would materialize into a band of outlaws or Indians.

"That, boys," he argued, "is not a cloud we see there, but a long, low ridge which the condition of the atmosphere at this time appears to elevate into a mountain ridge. The same atmospheric condition magnifies those horsemen into unnatural and grotesque giants. The fog is now lying low upon the earth and in the valleys, while above us it is light. The top of that ridge is above the fog, and we see it and those objects through the veil of mist—hence the delusion."

"Dot sounds all verry goot, Tom," replied Old Luke, "but I hopes dot you are mistooked, and them are demons after them tem Inshins and outlaws, so I do, py shimminy kroust!"

"Hail there goes other horsemen to meet them—see!" exclaimed Mr. Walden.

"Hark!" commanded Old Bill, "I thought I heard a sound like the far-off yell of demons."

"Ay! and look! by heavens, those shadowy forms have met in combat!" cried a ranger.

True enough, the two parties of horsemen had met on the ridge and seemed engaged in a deadly combat. Our friends could see them rushing to and fro, dashing here and there, swinging aloft their arms, bow and posture and reel and sway on their animals in an excited and violent manner. And presently they saw riderless horses flying up and down the ridge and plunging into the darkness below. Still no sounds could be heard, but, like figures in a panorama, the phantom combatants continued their struggle, until at length the ridge seemed to sink in the sea of fog, and with its shadowy forms disappear like the visions of a horrible dream.

"Mein Gott!" cried Old Luke, "who says now dot they war not phantoms?—dot dose war not a cloud what rise up out of de tark River of Death? Py shimminy, boys, it makes mine hair stand a leetle oop."

"To me it seems a rather mysterious performance, and as equally a mysterious disappearance," said Walden.

"To me all seems clear enough," said Tiger Tom. "The disappearance of the ridge and those combatants is easily accounted for. You see the fog is rising again. Instead of the ridge sinking down the fog has risen and concealed it from view. Doesn't that seem reasonable?"

"Well, I must admit it does," replied the prairie merchant, "and if your theory of the whole thing is correct, why, it beats a mirage all out of time."

"Yaw, I should remark dot it doz peat a marriage all to pieces oop, py shimminy kroust!—more flightin' in dot spectacle than in half a dozen marriages."

The rangers indulged in a hearty laugh at the old hunter's ludicrous mistake.

By this time all was shrouded in fog again, and the party concluded to resume their journey, and had but just got under way when a riderless horse came flying out of the fog from the west at a wild, break-neck speed. In its headlong flight it dashed right into the midst of the rangers and before it could get clear of its entanglement it was surrounded and caught.

A saddle and bridle were upon it. The former was covered with blood.

"That's an outlaw's horse—I know it by the mountings," declared Tom Brayton; "and, friends, that battle of phantoms that we all witnessed a few minutes ago resolves itself—in my mind, at least—into a battle between Black Ramardo and the Comanches under Long Lance."

"Do you really think so, Tom?" asked Walden in surprise.

"I feel sure of it, and from this time on shall fear nothing of the Indians. If Ramardo is after us, Long Lance is after Ramardo."

"But suppose the Ingins got walloped over yonder?" said Old Bill Proctor.

"Well, while it is true that we don't know the result of the battle, we can only hope for the best. Even if Ramardo was victorious it was at a cost of life that will make him slow about pitching into us, so we might as well be moving."

The cavalcade moved on, Tiger Tom now riding some distance in advance with Old Bill Proctor and Lew Clark, a young ranger noted as a trailer.

The fog still hung thick and heavy over the plain.

Not a sound save the "swish" of the horses' feet in the grass could be heard.

Never had such a fog been known in twenty years on the Texan prairies.

Old Bill declared it was a forecast of doomsday.

The sound of quick-trampling hoofs suddenly fell upon the ears of the trio.

Two horsemen galloped out of the west directly across their path. They were within twenty paces of our three friends before they discovered them.

Tiger Tom started, for at a glance he saw that one of the horsemen was the outlaw, Paul Ramardo.

And the outlaw recognizing his deadly enemy, Tiger Tom, whirled his horse to the right and put spur and fled.

Tom Brayton seized the lasso hanging over the horn of his saddle and spoke to his horse. Like an arrow the noble beast shot away upon the trail of the fleeing outlaw. A few bounds carried him apast Ramardo's friend and up to the very heels of the outlaw chief's horse.

Ramardo saw his danger and attempted to draw his revolver.

Once, twice, thrice Tiger Tom swings the lasso around and above his head, then the fatal noose shoots forward with a "hiss," and true to its aim falls about the form of Black Paul Ramardo.

Quick as a flash of lightning the rope is drawn taut and the outlaw is jerked violently from his saddle to the earth; but at the same instant almost a pistol in the hand of the outlaw behind rings out, and Old Bill Proctor pressing close behind the outlaw, hears a cry from the lips of Tom Brayton—sees the young ranger throw up his hands, reel and totter in his saddle.

"My God!" cried the old frontiersman, "the boy has been shot, but his death shall be avenged!"

As he spoke he raised his revolver and fired. The outlaw was not over ten paces away, and as Bill's weapon rung out he leaped almost clear of the saddle and fell a lifeless mass to the earth.

"Tom! Tom!" shouted the old man, "are you hurt, boy?"

But Tom made no reply as his frantic horse dashed away into the gloom and fog with his drooping rider, and the doomed outlaw chief fast in the embrace of the fatal lasso dragging at his flying heels!

CHAPTER VIII.

THE TRAILERS TRAPPED.

LIKE an arrow Tiger Tom's horse sped away from those ridden by Old Bill and the ranger, Lew Clark.

"Clark!" cried Old Bill, "the boy's hurt badly!"

"Ay, Bill, and we can never overtake that horse—it has no match for speed on these prairies."

Thus Clark responded as they pressed on in pursuit of the dim shadow that grew fainter and fainter until it disappeared altogether in the fog.

Seeing the utter hopelessness of overtaking Tiger Tom, and impressed with the fear that there were other outlaws near lying in wait for the main party they reined in their horses and came to a stand.

"It's no use, Bill," said young Clark, "the jig's up with poor Tom Brayton!"

"Ya as," drawled Old Bill sadly, "I'm afraid the boy's gone under; but thank God Paul Ramardo'll not live to triumph over his death, for unless that lasso, which is fastened to the boy's saddle, should break his carcass will be smeared over miles of Texan prairie!"

"Let us hasten back to our friends and break the sad news to them and put them on their guard, then we can follow Tom up on foot," suggested Clark.

And so the two rode back and met their friends, breaking the sad news to them gently as possible. The party was overwhelmed with sorrow and grief, and Jacquetta fell in a swoon. For some time her life was despaired of. Doctor Frank Adams, who had joined the rangers for the sake of adventure, and who acted in the capacity of physician and surgeon to the company, came to Mr. Walden's assistance. He hurriedly removed from his saddle his capacious and well-filled saddle-bags, from which he took some restoratives and administered to the girl, and in the course of an hour she began to recover.

"Py shim'ny krout, doctor," observed Old Luke, "you carries one leetle dbrug shop mit you, hey?"

"I am prepared for anything in the way of gunshot wounds, broken bones, bruised heads, rattlesnake and centipede bites," replied the doctor.

A consultation was held as to the future course to be pursued. As the river was but a short distance away it was decided that they go into camp until they could ascertain the true fate of Tiger Tom. So they moved over to the river and encamped in a little chaparral. The horses were secured inside the thicket, and a strong guard posted to avert surprise.

Upon Old Bill Proctor was now conferred the leadership of the party by the unanimous voice of all.

Luke Shoofstahl, Lew Clark, and Jake Scarr were detailed to go in search of Tom Brayton, and they at once took their departure, going afoot.

They had no difficulty in finding the trail made by the body of Black Ramardo being dragged along in the grass, for the grass was still lying flat.

Near where the fatal noose encircled the outlaw they found the villain's bat. Further on they found his revolver. They also found Tom's sombrero and revolver. The latter was covered with blood.

All along the plain was thickly covered with grass and also various species of cacti that bristled with sharp thorns; but through and over these the doomed outlaw had been dragged, and that, too, at lightning speed, as the long reaches and the deep hoof-marks of the horse indicated.

"A terrible, yet fitting death for Ramardo," said one of the trio, as they passed a bunch of thorny cactus through which the body had been dragged.

Finally the trailers found a piece of flayed cloth—a part of the outlaw's coat, and presently they began to find splotches of blood along on the grass and cactus.

For two hours they followed the ghastly trail, but found no trace of Tiger Tom's body. However, they took courage and hope in this, for they felt that there was some prospect of finding him alive, for up to this time it seemed that he had been able to keep the saddle, even though he were unable to control the movements of his horse.

Along toward noon the fog began to disperse, and in an hour or so the sky was clear and the sun shining out warm and bright. The great plain lay unfolded to the gaze of the trailers, and in the distance they saw a horse standing alone, its head erect. There was a saddle upon it, and although they were too far away to tell whether it was Tom's horse or not, they felt reasonably sure that it was, and leaving the trail they took a straight line across the plain toward the animal.

"Tom must be lyin' thar in the grass holdin' the critter," said Old Luke.

The three approached the horse. It was Tiger Tom's. As they drew nearer the horse showed uneasiness, but they saw it was being held by some one lying in the knee-deep grass.

"Py shim'ny krout! tw' boy ish dar!" cried Old Luke.

The three started into a run. They frightened the horse, and breaking away from the hand that held it, it dashed away over the plain, with a short piece of rope dragging behind from the saddle.

At the same instant five men, with cocked revolvers, rose up from the grass within ten feet of the disappointed, astounded trailers, whom they covered with their weapons, at the same time shouting out in a menacing voice:

"Surrender, or we'll blow your brains all over Texas!"

"Who the tuyvil pe you?" quickly replied Old Luke.

"Followers of Paul Ramardo, and have laid in wait for you with our trap baited with the steed of the late Tiger Tom. Drop those weapons or down you go."

The three trailers dropped their rifles. There was no other alternative.

"Now," said the spokesman of the quintette, "you are our prisoners and we shall hold you in hostage for the safe return of our captain whom we have reason to believe is a captive in the hands of the Texan Terrors."

"Do you mean Paul Ramardo?" asked young Clark.

"I mean Paul Ramardo," replied the outlaw with fierce emphasis.

"Then py shimminy krout! your mistaken as to him pein' a captive mit der ranshers," said Old Luke; "for dot pig shentleman, Polly Ramardo, ish sthrung out in grease splots clear pack over dish prairy for ten miles."

"See here," thundered the outlaw leader, a little, hatchet-faced Mexican half breed, whose repulsive face and diminutive figure hardly warranted his being called a man, "we want

none of your Dutch-Yankee slang and cackle; it will be better for you the sooner you tell the truth."

"Py tam I tells der trooth," affirmed Luke; "I tells you dot your captain git cotch in der lasso—der hoss runs away mit him—dot horse yonder—we foller up and find bloot all 'long on der grass where he drag. Dot's all we knows pout him."

The outlaws were thunderstruck by this intelligence. They had seen the broken lariat or lasso dragging behind the horse, but had never dreamed of the horrible purpose for which it had been used.

"You critters'll march straight to that grove yonder," said the little half-breed, "and if we find ye've lied to us we'll draw and quarter ye; and if the captain is dead we'll make it bad for a few Texan Tigers."

There was a little motte of timber a quarter of a mile to the left of the party and another about the same distance on the right. But toward the latter the three captives were marched covered by the outlaws' revolvers. Old Luke seemed downcast and disheartened. The rangers were surprised at this, having so often heard of the man's wonderful courage and bravery. Even the outlaws noticed his dejection and took no little delight in taunting him.

They finally reached the motte wherein five horses were hitched. The little Mexican half-breed having ordered a halt, said to one of his men:

"Pedro, bring two lariats."

The man obeyed when one of the ropes was cut in two. The half-breed took the long one, saying:

"Bind them two fellers tight, and I'll rope this big Dutch buffalo."

He advanced toward Old Luke and ordered him to cross his hands behind his back, but instead of obeying, the big hunter drove his huge fist into the outlaw's hatchet face with such terrific force as to knock the villain cold as a wedge fully a rod away, and then with a yell that sounded more like the roar of a lion he leaped toward the other dealing one blow on the face that sent him sprawling—giving the other a kick in the stomach with his big foot that doubled him up like a jack-knife on the earth, and, seizing the fourth, who had drawn a pistol and was trying to get in a shot, by the wrist he swung him clear of the earth as though he had been an infant and hurled him against a tree with such force as to kill him instantly. The fifth villain had been well cared for by the two rangers. In the excitement of the moment he had turned his back on the young prisoners to assist his friends, when the rangers sprung upon him, dealt him a blow in the face, and as he went down half stunned wrenched the revolver from his hand and sent a bullet through his brain. And no sooner was this done than they turned upon the other outlaws, two of whom had not been seriously injured and were endeavoring to escape. A shot from the revolver in the hand of young Clark brought the third one down, and Old Luke was in time to arrest the flight of the fourth by a well-directed blow on the head. The fifth one—the little Mexican—lay, or half reclined where he had fallen, with his face mashed into a pulp and blind as a bat. He was begging for mercy like a hero, although the blood in his mouth almost strangled him.

"Whoo-raw! for vict'ry!" roared Old Luke when he found they were once more free, and masters of the situation; "whoo-raw! for our Yankee rangers and der pig Dutch buffalo. Freedom did shriek when Kusiusko fell, and 'who ish der to mourn for dot little hatchet-face?'—not one. I say, hatchet-face, what you dinks of a lop-ear Dutchman, hey?"

"Mercy, senor, merey!" begged the blinded Mexican.

"Py shimminy krout! hear dot feller peg; while ago he calls me 'Dutch buffalo,'—now he ish 'Mercy, senator, merey!' he pe merey to plow his prains out, hey?"

The trio gathered up all the outlaws' arms, and such as they had no use for were concealed. Then, as the Mexican was totally blind, and they had no desire to take human life wantonly, although they would have been justified in doing so, the rangers placed the blind outlaw on his horse and permitted his only surviving friend to take charge of him.

Then the trailers mounted the other three outlaw horses and rode away to continue their search for Tiger Tom. They rode in the direction of the second motte spoken of heretofore. As they approached it they heard a faint cry come from out the grove. They drew rein and listened. They heard the cry again.

"Py shimminy krount!" exclaimed Old Luke, "dot sounds shust like another bapy cry!"

"It was a child's cry, Luke," replied Clark; "I heard it plain enough."

"I wonder if dot Inshun woman's drifted ofer here mit her bapy? Poys, let's see 'pout it."

They dismounted, hitched their horses in the edge of the grove and then crept cautiously through the shrubbery in the direction whence the cry came. They had gone but a short distance when they came in sight of that same little hammock that Luke had found the day before in the mountains. It was fastened to the limb of a tree and the chubby hands of the baby could be seen reaching upward as if to grasp the rustling leaves above it, while ever and anon a lusty cry escaped its lips. And beneath the hammock, kneeling beside a bloody, prostrate form was the woman Nathalia.

With a feeling of horrible misgivings, the three men advanced toward the woman, who, when she heard their footsteps, rose and turned toward them with a wild, distressed look upon her face. There was blood upon her hands and garments, and before either of the three men could speak, she pointed to the prostrate form lying on the ground, stript to the waist and covered with blood, and said:

"Dead!"

The three glanced at the body. It was that of Tiger Tom!

A groan escaped the lips of the trailers.

CHAPTER IX.

THE OUTCOME OF IT ALL.

OVERCOME with sorrow at the loss of their young and beloved leader, the two rangers, Clark and Scarr, sat down by the body and bowed their heads in grief.

Old Luke turned to Nathalia and said sorrowfully:

"Py shim'ny, gal, dot ish awful, awful bad!"

"It makes Nathalia's heart bleed," replied the woman; "she tried to save the life of the young pale-face, for but yesterday he saved hers."

"How dit you git here, Nathalee?" asked the old borderman.

"I came here with the warriors who passed on in pursuit of the pale-face bad men. We found the young ranger here, and I stayed to help him. Yesterday my father started with his warriors after Paul Ramardo, the White Raven, as my people named him. He promised the Great Spirit that he would take the scalp of the man who made my life so dark and sad. Out on the plain, when the fog was as dark as the brow of night, the Comanche warriors met the White Raven and his followers, and a bloody battle was fought."

"Oh-ho, then dot eex-plains all 'pout dot silent pattle of der phantoms we see'd dis mornin.' Poor Tom was right," Luke said, nodding his head thoughtfully; "put how didt der pattle ent, hey? Which got whipped, Miss Inshun?"

"The Comanches defeated the outlaws," Nathalia went on, in a half-wailing tone, as her form awayed to and fro like a reed in the wind, "but it was worse than defeat to Nathalia, for her father was slain and—"

"Mein Gott in himmell ish dot sof" broke in Old Luke.

"My father and my mother are both dead now," moaned the grief-stricken woman, "and I have no friend left but my baby."

"Yes, you haf, by shim'ny krount you haf," declared Old Luke, in a tone that almost frightened the squaw; "you can shust count on ole Luke Shopfstahl till der cows cooms home. I ish an ole lop-ear Dutchman, I knows, but py shim'ny krount I ish got a heart as well as anybody, I'll bet."

"Luke! Luke!" suddenly cried one of the rangers, "Tom opens his eyes! he is not dead!"

"Bless Gott!" shouted Old Luke, turning to the wounded man. "Tom, Tom, are you mooch hurt?"

"Ah! it is you, Luke," said Tom, feebly, as he opened his eyes and gazed around him, and up into the face of the hunter.

"Yes, Tom, and we thought you was dead, but py shimminy krount! you sha'n't die now."

"I don't know, boys," replied Tom; "I'm badly hurt. I'm afraid it's all up with me."

"Never say die, Tom," admonished Old Luke, "put we'd petter see whar you's hurt, poy, and doctor you soom."

An examination of the wound showed that the ranger had been shot in the back, and, the ball striking a rib, had glanced downward and lodged somewhere in the body. Tom was quite weak from loss of blood, and every breath was taken with a twinge of sharp pain.

The three men, assisted by Nathalia, dressed

the wound as well as their means and rude knowledge of surgery would admit, then young Scarr was dispatched on horseback to the camp on the Concho for Dr. Adams, for means to construct a litter and men to assist in moving the wounded man to camp.

Tom gradually rallied from the worst effects of his nervous shock, and conversed in a low, feeble tone with his friends. He had remembered all from the moment he was shot up to the time he fell from his horse on the edge of the motte. Then all was a blank to him until he recovered and found his three friends and the Indian woman at his side.

Old Luke and young Clark narrated their adventures in search of him, and thus the hours were passed until Scarr returned from the Concho with the doctor and six rangers.

About the same time twenty Comanche warriors entered the motte, also. It was the same party that had found Tom lying on the prairie and removed him to the grove, where he was left in Nathalia's care. They brought with them the lifeless form of their chief, Long Lance, and, when it had been placed upon the ground, Nathalia fell upon her knees beside it, and burst into a sad and sorrowful wailing that moved the whites to tears. Long and heart-rending were her lamentations, that finally died away in low, convulsive moans.

Dr. Adams proceeded to make an examination of Tom Brayton's wound, and, as he progressed in his work, it was evident from the look upon his face that the injury was far worse than he had expected to find it.

When he had concluded his examination he turned aside and said in a low tone to a ranger:

"Some one must go at once to the fort for the surgeon. I must have assistance. Tom's case is a serious one, and the chances are but one in a hundred. If he survives the nervous shock, there is great danger of death from hemorrhage; and if he passes this, then there are other dangers to be apprehended, such as formation of an abscess and blood poisoning. Tell the surgeon to bring an ambulance. It would be well while there to tell Colonel Miller that his daughter, Irene, is safe with the Texan Terror, and that there is no further danger to be feared from Long Lance, that Paul Ramardo is dead, and his band, I should judge, entirely demoralized and broken up."

"All right, doctor," replied the ranger, and in another minute the brave fellow was in his saddle galloping across the prairie in the direction of Fort Concho.

A litter was at once constructed out of poles and a blanket and Tiger Tom carefully placed upon it. Then four men lifted him and started with easy steps for camp, Doctor Adams walking at the side of the litter closely watching the face of his young captain and patient.

Soon after the whites left the motte a sadder procession filed out of its shadows and moved away toward the north with the lifeless form of the Comanche chief, Nathalia with her babe riding behind, sad, sorrowful and heart-broken.

"Py shimminy krount, doctor," said Old Luke as he watched the Indians moving away, "dot ish der whitest Inshun woman I most never sees."

"She is half white, Luke," replied the doctor; "her mother they say was an intelligent white woman, the daughter of an old Indian agent."

"Doctor, didt you ever hear of an Inshun gal marryin' a pig Dutchman?"

"I don't know that I ever did, Luke," Adams responded with a smile on his face, for he saw that Luke was in earnest—serious enough; "but I can see no reason why such a marriage would not be as congenial as any other."

"Nor I eether, py shim'ny frost," declared Luke.

It was a slow and tedious journey across the prairie so that it was late in the day when the party reached camp. There were no demonstrations on their arrival for the doctor preceding the main party into camp, forbid it.

A couch was prepared for the wounded man out of leaves, grass and blankets. Some nourishment was then given him and after he had rested awhile, Jacquetta, in accordance with his wish, was permitted to see him. The brave little girl mastered her emotions well as her eyes fell upon his pale, white face—greeting him with words of encouragement.

Tom took her hand in his and pressed it to his lips and then he closed his eyes and for a moment both were silent, though the responsive thrill of their young hearts spoke plainer than words.

"Tom," Jacquetta finally said with tremulous lips, "I am so sorry that you are hurt, but you will get well, won't you?"

Tom looked up into her face and with a voice full of resolution replied:

"Yes, Jacquetta, God willing. There is something in this world for me to live for."

Jacquetta's lips quivered and despite her effort to keep them back, tears welled up into her eye. Bending over Tom she said in a low tone:

"Tom, I shall pray for you."

Toward evening Tom's fever rose alarmingly, but the doctor watched his pulse closely and treated him with remarkable skill.

The party must now depend upon their rifles for food, and their supplies already being quite meager a party was detailed to go in search of game. Toward evening they returned with three deer that they had found in a chaparral a few miles down the river.

Night finally settled over the bivouac of the little party. The weather was mild and pleasant. A bower had been constructed around Tom's couch, another had been prepared hard by for Irene and Jacquetta.

About midnight the maidens retired. Mr. Walden and Dr. Adams were then watching at Tom's bedside. Six men paced to and fro on guard just within the edge of the chaparral. Those that were not on duty lay rolled in their blankets on the ground taking a much needed sleep.

A deadly silence reigned in and around the chaparral.

It was about two o'clock. Dr. Adams was counting the pulse throbs of his patient when suddenly a wild, terrified shriek from the maidens' bower pierced through the silence of the night.

"My God! what is wrong?" cried Mr. Walden.

In an instant every ranger was upon his feet, revolver in hand.

CHAPTER X.

ANOTHER PATIENT FOR DR. ADAMS.

TIGER TOM was startled from his repose by the girl's shriek, and half delirious, felt at his side for his pistol; but quieting him Dr. Adams took the little pocket lantern they had been using by the young man's bedside and followed by Walden hurried to the maidens' bower.

Their entrance was greeted by another scream and a sharp "skirring" sound like the shrill, warning rattle of a snake.

Lowering the light the men saw the girls sitting up in their couch, their faces white with terror, and on the blanket, that was spread across Irene's lap they saw a monster rattle-snake coiled with head and tail erect, the latter quivering with that horrible sound.

Up to this time the girls had only heard the serpent, but when the light fell upon its spotted, scaly form and Irene saw it lying in her lap, she uttered a scream and throwing out her hand attempted to dash the blanket and serpent aside; but she was not quick enough. The reptile struck and his fangs were buried in her arm.

With a convulsive cry the poor girl fainted. Jacquetta sprang from the couch dragging the blanket and serpent aside. In an instant the snake's head was ground into pulp under the doctor's heel, then dropping on his knees by Irene's side he tore away the sleeve of her dress and there upon the white plump arm beheld two dark globules of blood where the serpent's fangs had pierced the skin.

This was not the first case of the kind the doctor had treated. In fact, there was scarcely a man among the rangers but what had either been bitten by a rattlesnake, a centipede or tarantula, and successfully treated by the young doctor.

In a moment or two he had cauterized the wound, and as soon as the maiden recovered from her swoon he administered brandy and other antidotes quite freely. The arm swelled to twice its natural size and turned spotted as the snake itself, but the girl suffered but little pain.

Sleep, however, did not close another eye in the chaparral that night, and between his two patients Doctor Adams was kept busy.

When daylight dawned it brought little sunshine to the hearts of the party, for the doctor said Tiger Tom was sinking and, while he might rally, the worst could be expected at any moment.

This was indeed sad information, and it seemed that Jacquetta's heart would break. It fell with double force now, for all had fostered the belief that he would recover.

Mr. Walden went to the young ranger's bedside to relieve the doctor a few minutes in his watch. Tom opened his eyes, and recognizing the prairie trader, said:

"Mr. Walden, I fear I am growing worse. I

want to live, oh so bad, and will if I can. But it looks gloomy to me now, and for fear something does happen me, I want to tell you something—a secret—while my mind is clear. I know you will forgive me, and it is but just and right that you should know all."

"Tom," replied Walden, "I know not what secret you have reference to, but whatever it may be, you now have my forgiveness, for I know it can be nothing criminal."

"Thank you," said Tom, his face lighting up with a thankful look; "but my stay here is short. When I was in your employ as guide, and became acquainted with your daughter, a friendship sprang up between us that in time ripened into love. This, of course, you did not fail to see, and I know that for this fact you discharged me from your service. Since then I understand that I have been mistrusted of holding a grudge against you, but this is all untrue. In fact, the very reverse has been the truth. As a Texan ranger, since my dismissal by you, I have endeavored to confine myself and band to work along the route which I knew you usually traveled. I had your protection in view. I knew that Jacquetta was traveling, and Jacquetta, Mr. Walden, was my wife!"

"What? Jacquetta your wife?" Walden exclaimed, starting as though a dagger had pierced his heart.

"Yes, Mr. Walden, this is the great wrong to you," Tom continued; "while you were still at L—, where you discharged me, Jacquetta and I stole away and were secretly married by a priest. She went back to you with her secret locked in her breast with the intention of staying with you until she had attained her majority, when she was to reveal our secret and implore your pardon and forgiveness. The time is now up, and I was to have met you at Fort Concho and claimed my bride; but, alas! I fear the joy to which I have looked forward these last two years will never be reached on earth."

"Well, well," said the prairie merchant, in perfect composure, "such a thing I never dreamed of; but I see now why Jacquetta has always stood up for you when others were denouncing Tiger Tom as an outlaw and murderer. But, Tom, while this is more than I had expected, I freely forgive you both, and my prayer is that you may recover, and that your and Jacquetta's future years may be attended with everlasting blessings."

"Again I thank you, Mr. Walden," said Tom; "but I have not told you all I wished about myself and conduct. After our marriage and your departure East, I sought employment among the rancheros down the valley. These men had been suffering serious losses of cattle and horses at the hands of the outlaws and marauding bands of Indians; and so they made me a proposition which I accepted at once. It was that I raise a band of independent rangers and drive the thieves and outlaws out of the country."

"The ranchmen were all wealthy fellows and were to furnish us with a complete outfit from horses to firearms, and pay each man so much per month for his services. They had grown tired of waiting on the military to defend them and their interests. There was too much red-tape system about the soldiers for quick and efficient work, and the cattle-men all came to the conclusion that fifty independent rangers—brave and daring fellows—would do more toward ridding the country of its outlawry than half of the United States army. I had no trouble in organizing my company. Most of my followers are rancheros though there are a few that never saw a wild Indian until he became a Texan Tiger. Dr. Adams is the son of a wealthy eastern gentleman. He was just from the medical college making a tour of Texas for health and pleasure when I met him. He had heard of my company, and being full of the spirit of adventure he prevailed on me to accept him as physician and surgeon to my company, and a valuable acquisition has he been. He is a polished gentleman, yet a wild, reckless dare-devil when in the saddle. In fact, the company was composed of reckless, daring fellows, and it was from this fact, that they became known as Texan Terrors and Texan Tigers. The story that we were outlaws and robbers ourselves, I found on investigation, originated inside of a certain military post. The commandant there is a dashing young fellow with more style than brains, and had hoped to distinguish himself in running down outlaws and in fighting Indians, but it seems the Texan Tigers won his coveted laurels, and through hopes perhaps of being sent against us, he made an official report to the general com-

manding the Department of the Gulf in which he gave it as his lordly opinion that Tiger Tom was in league with the Indians and outlaws. Of course, some believed it, but it never worried us a bit. In fact, we rather enjoyed it knowing that it was false, and some of my boys even expressed a desire to meet, on the open prairie, that young commandant and his followers and try the mettle of their swords. So this is all there is in the story of the Texan Terrors being outlaws."

"I thank God for it—that it is true, Tom," replied Walden, a great weight lifted from his mind and heart, "but you must rest now—you have already talked too much."

"I feel much better, Mr. Walden," Tom said, "since I have unburdened my heart of its secret."

"Well, you must keep quiet, anyhow; I will find Jacquetta and have a talk with her so that there need be no further obstacles between your affections."

A look of great relief passed over the face of the wounded man, as Mr. Walden rose and walked away.

Jacquetta was sitting by herself weeping when her father approached her and said:

"My child, Tom is a great deal better."

"Oh, thank Heaven!" she cried, clasping her hands together, as she looked up into her father's face.

"Yes," continued the merchant, "and he made a confession to me of your secret marriage."

The girl started up, uttering a little cry. Her face became suffused, and the words she would have spoken died on her tremulous lips.

"And while I regret the course you took," Mr. Walden continued, after a moment's hesitation, "I freely forgive the deception, and trust in Heaven that Tom may recover, and that your life will be one of happiness and love."

"Oh, my dear father, this from your lips have I prayed these two long, long years!" Jacquetta cried, throwing her arms about her father's neck, and raining kisses upon him.

"Come, come, my child," the father said; "you have a duty now to perform."

So drying her tears and calming her emotions, Jacquetta returned to the bedside of her young husband. A glance at her face told him that the burden she had so long carried in her breast, a source of fear and remorse, had been removed, and that the light of an unclouded heart shone out in joyful radiance.

"Oh, Tom, my husband!" she cried, as she twined her arms about his neck and kissed his pale lips. "Heaven has been good to us, after all."

"Yes, my darling," Tom replied; "and I will live now, for your sake, in spite of outlaw bullets."

And his words seemed spoken out of the spirit of prophecy, for from that hour he seemed to rally and grow stronger, though very, very slowly.

Toward the close of the third day after Tom's injury the man on guard descried a party approaching over the plain from the west, and through fear that it might be enemies everything was put in readiness to give them a warm reception; but as the party drew nearer all saw that it was a party of mounted soldiers who were followed by an ambulance.

All knew then that the surgeon sent for to the fort had arrived, and what was more, his escort of soldiers was headed by Irene's father, Colonel Miller.

As the party rode up to the chaparral and dismounted Irene forgot her snake-bite, and the strange fancies that the handsome face of Doctor Adams had wrought in her heart, and she rushed to her father who received her with open arms and rained kisses and tears alike upon her. The meeting of father and daughter was a joyous one, and after they had conversed a few minutes the colonel advanced to Tom's bedside and taking him by the hand said:

"I am down, colonel, in a bad fix for a fighting man," replied Tom with a smile.

"Ay, but one constantly where bullets are flying," said the colonel, "will get hit once in awhile. But they tell me you have done the country inestimable good in killing Black Ramardo and a good share of his band."

"I guess we got away with that outlaw, but he gave us a warm fight or two, and some of my best men fell."

"Well, it will afford me great pleasure to make an official report of the good work of Tiger Tom's Independent Rangers. It will be an offset to the report made by Captain Dent reflecting somewhat upon the conduct of the Tigers."

"Thank you, colonel," Tom said with a smile.

The two doctors at once held a consultation. The old surgeon was well satisfied with the young man's treatment of the case, and could do, or suggest nothing that might be for the better. Of course, the bullet could not be removed because it could not be found, but the doctors did not consider its removal necessary to a complete recovery. The party was somewhat surprised, however, when the doctors informed them that it would not do to undertake to remove Tom under four weeks, no matter how fast he might convalesce; and so arrangements were made to pass the time the best they could.

Colonel Miller sent to the fort and had a number of tents and some commissary supplies brought over to Camp Brayton, as the place was called.

Old Luke and Bill Proctor took it upon themselves to supply game for the party and did so—furnishing deer and antelope in abundance.

In the mean time Mr. Walden, accompanied by half a dozen rangers returned down the river to where he had left his freight wagons entrenched and found them all as he had left them. Having made known the situation of affairs up the river, he sent the wagons on through to their destination while he returned to Camp Brayton to assist at the bedside of his wounded son-in-law.

After it was known beyond a doubt that the young ranger was out of danger, the gloom on the faces of all began to disappear, and their spirits to revive. In fact the last few days of their stay in Camp Brayton became a season of joy and festivities.

But at length the time for departure came, and early one bright morning the party set off across the plain toward Fort Concho, where in due course of time it arrived in safety.

And now had come the time for separations—the parting of old and new friends.

Old Bill Proctor and Dutch Luke were the first to leave, though it was with the good wishes and blessings of those by whom they had stood so gallantly during those trying days of danger and death.

Mr. Walden gave up the business of a prairie trader, and with his son-in-law went into the stock business in the San Saba valley, and today the firm of Walden & Brayton is among the wealthiest in Texas. They employ not less than fifty rancheros, and among them are most of Tom's old band of Texan Tigers.

The outcome of Irene's snake-bite was that Dr. Adams fell in love with her, and his love being fully reciprocated, they were finally married, and reside now in Austin, where the doctor enjoys an extensive and lucrative practice.

Once a year, at a stated period, there is a reunion at the great ranch of Walden & Brayton, of all those who can attend, of the little band that has figured so conspicuously in our story. Old Bill Proctor and Dutch Luke never fail to be on hand—the same happy, rollicking old fellows of yore. And would you believe it! At the last meeting Luke brought the handsome half-breed Indian woman, Nathalia. They were man and wife, and Luke demonstrated to Dr. Adams that a Dutchman and Indian woman could live happily together, "py shimminy krout!"

THE END.

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